

PROLOGUE

IT'S MY LIFE

It's my life

It's now or never

I ain't gonna live forever

I just wanna live while I'm alive

(It's my life)

My heart is like an open highway

Like Frankie said, "I did it my way"

I just wanna live while I'm alive

'Cause it's my life

It's My Life ~ Bon Jovi

Slightly grey with a tint of yellowing, that was the colour of the ceiling above his bed. The young boy, no, man, stared at it intently, squinting his eyes to discern the intricacies of the pattern above him. He was lying on a small bed whose sheets looked like they hadn't been washed in a long time, but that didn't seem to bother him. His hands were crossed behind his head as he lay partially on the mattress with the lower half of his body dangling off the edge. Lazily he moved a stray strand of hair away from his eyes and settled it back into the mess of a black mop that adorned his head.

This young man looked completely normal, everything about him was nondescript and akin to any other teenager, though, granted he was slightly smaller in stature than most teenagers.

However, there was one powerful difference between this young man and the other residents of Little Whinging. He was a wizard. Not just any wizard, but Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived.

Harry sighed lightly; he had been in the same position for two hours now. The whole time trying to wrap his mind around the concept that two dementors had just attacked him and his cousin. Two soul-sucking creatures had nearly gotten the best of him. But he survived; he had a knack of doing that, surviving that is. When others die, he miraculously always survived.

Harry sat up and his shoulders slumped, the same thoughts invaded his mind as they had done since the beginning of summer, thoughts of another young man, his name was Cedric Diggory. Prefect, handsome, excellent in all his classes, but still a modest person, someone who deserved everything good life had to offer, but never would see it. The reason behind Cedric's death was none other than Lord Voldemort, the same man who had been trying to kill Harry since the age of one. Cedric was unfortunately just another victim caught up in collateral damage.

Harry had survived that encounter against a newly embodied Lord Voldemort, like he always did, but at what price? Harry shifted on the mattress till his back was pressed against the wall, he tilted his head upwards but his eyes were still closed as he contemplated that question. At what price?

Harry jumped out of bed and walked to his desk, covered with haphazardly strewn papers, quills, and inkwells. He fished out a thick sheaf of yellowing parchment-like paper that was printed on with tiny text and animated photographs. It was a copy of the wizarding daily, The Daily Prophet. Despite being worth next-to-nothing in Harry's mind, he knew that most of the people in the wizarding world took The Prophet very seriously. Unfortunately the rubbish being spouted by it as of late had been very disturbing.

Harry may not have been the sharpest tool in the shed like Hermione, but the Sorting Hat didn't consider putting him in Slytherin for nothing. The tides had turned against him and he could only begin to imagine how horrid the upcoming school year was going to be.

School year...

Harry couldn't help it; as he stood in the middle of his tiny room with The Prophet in his hands, his slumped shoulders started shaking with his restrained laughter. It still hadn't sunk into him that there

might not be a school year this year, at least not for him. The Ministry would snap his wand and with the public outcry for his 'delusional and attention-seeking ways' to be curbed, he could only expect the worst possible outcome.

What could Dumbledore do having been knocked off his positions of authority as well? Especially being considered a senile old man and having more and more lies printed about him daily. Would Harry be allowed to go back as Hagrid's assistant? Is that what Dumbledore did for students who got expelled, turn them into Groundskeepers?

Harry involuntarily cringed at the mental image of him living in the same hut, with an exceptionally long beard, entertaining new students with tea and rock cakes. He loved Hagrid and always would, but being in his position was something Harry never imagined himself to be in.

That abruptly ended his moment of black humor, Harry trudged back into bed and sat down heavily, his head facing upwards, staring ahead blankly at the same slightly grey pattern with a tint of yellowing. All he could do for now, was wait.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The sound of scratching on the tiny window in his room broke Harry out of his reverie. He scuttled out of bed to open the window and allow a very ruffled Hedwig inside. Despite her disheveled appearance, the snowy owl looked inordinately pleased with herself as she stuck her leg out for Harry to take his letters from his friends.

Harry carefully extricated the letters and then reached his hand inside the bag on the far side of his table to pull out a few of owl treats. Hedwig hooted gratefully as she ate and then headed into her cage for a long-awaited rest.

Harry shook his head at the antics of his moody owl and sat down to see what new dismissive missive his supposed friends had sent him.

The first letter he knew immediately was from Ron, his illegible scrawl made it very easy to place his identity from the moment Harry's eyes fell on the words. However after reading the words, his mood did not improve at all.

Hey mate,

Dad just told us about what happened. I hope you're okay; we're all dead worried about you! Don't worry; it will all be over soon.

Ron.

PS: Your ruddy bird nearly chewed my hand off, put a leash on her!

That's it? THAT'S ALL he had to say?

Normally Harry would be seething by this point, but after a summer full of lack-luster letters and especially the ordeal he had just gone through, Harry could neither spare the energy nor the care to be angry.

He then opened the second letter, which he knew would be from his other best friend: Hermione. He also knew that it would be as frustratingly vague as all the other letters he had received this summer.

Dear Harry,

Mr. Weasley just told us about the attack, are you okay? I nearly had a panic-attack and Ron had to calm me down so I didn't start hyperventilating. Why is it that you always get into these situations? Don't worry, Dumbledore promised us that you won't have to stay there for long, I'm dreadfully sorry I can't tell you more, but I will see you soon.

Also Hedwig seems unusually agitated; she was very aggressive for longer replies. I'm sorry again Harry.

Love,

Hermione.

Harry smiled his first real smile this summer. It may seem unbelievable, but the letters he just read were the longest letters he had received from his friends. He eyed Hedwig and then proceeded to give her another owl treat. Hedwig, in a half-dreamy state, just hooted gratefully.

"Good work girl, I'm very proud of you, next time, claw their faces if necessary."

Harry placed the letters on his desk with the other dismissive ones he had received from his friends (although he was increasingly tempted to call them erstwhile friends with the way things were headed). He then went back into bed and continued to stare at the ceiling, thinking he could do that until sufficient time had passed and he was tired enough to fall asleep.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

A gentle knocking on his door interrupted his fruitless activity again. He stared at the door in consternation, why would his relatives want anything to do with him? His Aunt had explicitly just sent him back with no permission to leave the room whatsoever. Perhaps she would tell him who had sent her that odd howler, "Remember Petunia", it said ominously, who in Merlin's name was that?

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Harry sighed as he turned his head to face the door and called out, "If the doors unlocked you can come in Aunt Petunia."

Harry turned his head back and tried to lose himself again.

A low creaking sound was heard as the door was hesitantly opened and a large frame, much larger than Aunt Petunia appeared in the doorway.

"Um... It's not Mum, it's me, Dudley." Came a gruff but still hesitant voice.

Harry's head snapped in the direction of the door, his eyes narrowed perceptibly and a slight sneer adorned his face.

"Look Dudley, I wasn't doing anything to you, those dementors would have killed you had I not done anything." Harry said determinedly, he was ready to explain himself in order to avoid a confrontation with Dudley, which would lead to another confrontation with his Uncle, and he had enough on his plate as of now.

"I know..." Came Dudley's reply.

"I—" Harry abruptly closed his mouth, whatever reply he was expecting, it certainly wasn't that. "Well, good, then. Um... you know, so, um... yeah." He said lamely.

Dudley rolled his shoulders as if squaring his courage and then said what seemed to be a well-rehearsed speech, "I, uh, spoke to Mum after she sent you up and Dad went out to get some medicine. I, uh, needed to know, see, what were those things that attacked me? Mum was right scared, but she told me, she, um, remembered it as something that, uh, um... Aunt Lily..." he paused hesitantly, "...had once told her. So, I, uh... wanted to just say," he took a deep breath and seemed to exhale it out of him, "Thanks."

Harry was pretty sure that right about now, his mouth was hanging open, in abject shock. Dudley just... thanked him. Funny, he never associated Dudley, thanks, and himself in a positive context within the same sentence ever before, it was unfathomable. Seeing Dudley squirm under his unflinching gaze, Harry closed his mouth and looked away.

"Er... You're welcome I guess. Just... uh... did she tell you who sent the letter?" Harry asked, trying to curb his burning curiosity to solve that mystery.

Dudley's hesitation momentarily vanished and was replaced by annoyance, "No, she normally tells me things when I ask her, but she was so... firm, she's never said no to me before."

Harry deflated at that, but still he was thinking that this entire conversation was a bit too surreal for his tastes.

"Well... Uh, I guess thanks for telling me what you knew anyway." Harry shrugged.

Dudley looked uncomfortable too, he mumbled something and was about to leave, but then stopped at the doorway. Harry looked at him worriedly, internally hoping that he would just leave and end this torment of discomfort that they both were experiencing at trying to hold a civil conversation with each other.

Dudley swallowed and turned around, "Can I... um... ask you something?"

Harry shrugged.

"Is Mrs. Figg, one of the fr... um... one of your people?"

That was a really good question. Harry should have just denied it, but figured if Dudley was honest with him about Aunt Petunia, he could be honest too, "I didn't know till today either," he replied, "she told me she was sent here by Dumbledore to keep an eye on me."

Dudley nodded, but he still didn't seem to want to leave.

Harry was losing his patience now, "Was there something else Dudley?"

Dudley was again looking tongue-tied, there was a look of intense concentration on his face but it ended up making him look constipated,

"Well, those dementum thingies," here he shuddered, "they made me feel cold and... horrible. Mum said they make you feel the worst experience of your life, I heard... I heard Mum being tortured, it was terrible."

He then looked at Harry expectantly and Harry was floundering, a simple thank-you was hard enough to digest but this, this was sharing personal information with the very same cousin who had tortured him his entire childhood. There were certain lines that he was not going to cross no matter what.

"Yeah, they do, do that, I mean. Horrible, wretched things dementors." Dudley figured he wasn't going to be forthcoming with details so he just shrugged and let it pass.

"Listen, um... I don't how to say this, but um... You're always on edge, just try and take a break, if you need something, then... uh... just ask me, and I'll... see what I can do."

Okay that was enough, either the dementor had sucked his soul out and Harry was having a weird otherworldly experience, or this was a polyjuiced Death Eater.

"Dudley why are you offering me help and advice? What happened to hating the freak?" Harry spat venomously but Dudley seemed unfazed.

"You saved my life Harry, it's the least I could do."

With that said, Dudley finally left Harry alone. Unfortunately Harry's thoughts were all over the place. He then spent the next fifteen minutes pinching himself till his skin was red to ascertain he wasn't dreaming or hallucinating, since this was him after all.

Yet it seemed Dudley was being genuinely honest.

"Huh..." Harry said to no one in particular, "That was unexpected."

A little more time passed uninterrupted, Harry had moved from staring at the ceiling to staring at the wall adjacent to the door. It was pale beige, though he assumed the plaster was once white, faded with time. He was in between of counting the cracks in the wall when a sudden thought hit him and broke his musings.

Why?

Why me?

It wasn't an angst-ridden, emotion-filled exclamation; it was just an honest musing. Every time, Harry was specifically targeted, no matter what went wrong and he just wondered why him?

Harry purposefully went towards his desk and pulled out a fresh piece of parchment. After dipping his quill in his inkwell, he began a letter that would hopefully provide some answers to the one man that Harry knew had all the answers.

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

I was reflecting on all the events that have passed since I came into the magical world and, although this may seem immodest, it feels like everything boils down to me for some reason. I was just wondering if there is something... more to it. You once told me you would tell me why Quirrel couldn't stand my touch, why my scar was connected to Voldemort and why He came after me in the first place when I was older. I now am older and I want to know, I need to know.

Harry Potter.

"Bloody HELL!" Harry said angrily as he threw away another batch of futile letters from his friends. It was their usual tripe, but by the state of Hedwig's ruffled feathers, he knew that she had followed up on his request to scratch their faces if necessary. Still, it stood to yield no fruitful results except to assuage his feelings of rage and betrayal towards Ron and Hermione.

What happened to sticking together no matter what?

Harry sighed trying to relieve himself of his pent-up frustration from the last few days. You would think that after a dementor attack, they would get him out of here, but all he got was, 'soon Harry, really soon you'll be with us'. What irked him even more was that they were all together! In the meantime he was the only one out of the loop and kept away. Also it had been three days since his letter pleading his case to Dumbledore had been sent and he still had no response.

That was why a very pissed off Harry Potter went down to the kitchen for a glass of water. Ever since the dementor incident, his relatives (excluding Dudley) seemed to give him a wide berth. Aunt Petunia stopped noticing his existence altogether and Harry didn't even bother pestering her about the letter, it was her business. As long as it kept a roof over his head, who was he to complain? Uncle Vernon looked at him with silent rage, all the time, it was quite disconcerting, but he kept it to himself for some unknown reason. Whatever his reason maybe, Harry wasn't one to look a gift hippogriff in the beak. Dudley was the only notable exception to the norm that his parents had set. He would go out of his way to get Harry to be comfortable, whether that be by not picking on him at all, leaving him alone, or even slipping him some chocolate from time to time. Harry didn't know what to make of Dudley, so he just stayed on-guard whenever his cousin was in the room.

But this afternoon he was just too frustrated to care and his newly concerned cousin picked up on it immediately.

Harry sat at the kitchen table with a glass of water, holding the glass with much more force than strictly necessary. Dudley looked around

carefully and seeing neither of his parents in the vicinity, he approached Harry.

"You okay?" He asked from three feet away.

Harry just grunted; he was not in the mood to 'talk', especially not with Dudley.

Dudley seemed to sense this; he screwed up his face into his patented concentrated-constipated look as he thought something out, very slowly. His face then broke into a huge shit-eating grin.

"Hey, uh, Harry," he asked carefully, "you seem pissed and, um, some mates of mine are meeting me later, not Polkiss and his troupe, other guys from Smeltings whom you haven't met ever; we'll be having a pint or two. You look like you could use it."

Harry was really taken aback, he momentarily forgot why he was angry, but then like a bucket of cold water it hit him that whether it be Polkiss or not, Dudley and his type of friends will stay the same. Being around them when they were sober was dangerous enough, when they were drunk, well... Harry would rather cut his losses.

"Uh... Thanks Dudley but I think I'll pass."

Was Harry hallucinating (again?) or was there actually a brief look of disappointment on Dudley's face?

Dudley just shrugged, "Think it over, you look unhappy over something and well, I've found that pissing yourself away may not be a permanent solution, but it sure is fun."

Harry just shook his head and was leaving when Dudley called from behind, "I'm heading out at seven, meet me down here if you change your mind."

Harry was just speechless and he wished he would have saved Dudley's life years ago, he could have missed out on years of Harry-hunting that way.

Once back in his room, Harry flopped down on his bed and began reading The Prophet. That turned out to be a bad decision; he ended up binning (whatever was left of) it. Harry was beginning to

get restless, he opened his trunk and pulled out some old books and began revising, if only Hermione could see him now, she would be so proud.

Harry was halfway through revising inanimate to animate transfiguration (turning a pincushion to a pig, why would he ever need to know that again?) when he heard a tapping on his window. He turned his eyes to see an ordinary barn-owl there. Harry opened the window to allow it inside and let it settle in Hedwig's cage (who had disappeared as soon as she delivered his 'friends' letters and seen his temper tantrum). He gave it a treat and some water before settling down in his rickety old chair and opening his missive.

It was a plain parchment, folded closed. He unfolded it and tried ironing out the wrinkles in the paper with his hand. Satisfied with his effort he began reading it and knew instantly that it was Dumbledore; he had to visibly restrain himself from getting too excited.

Dear Harry,

You are right, I did promise you that I would give you the answers to your questions when you were older. Unfortunately information of this nature is very sensitive and you can understand my concerns with not wanting to write them down in a letter. However, that said, I do not think that when I said 'older' I meant when you were barely fifteen years old Harry. You are not yet ready and when you are, the information I possess will be yours to know.

Sincerely,

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.

(Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Grand Sorcerer, Order of Merlin First Class, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards)

Now, Harry was past seething. He threw the letter in the bin with the tatters of the Prophet and the previous letters from his friends. THAT DOES IT!

Harry was so at ends that he could barely concentrate on his transfiguration anymore. He descended to the kitchen to have a few scraps of dinner only to find Dudley near the main door putting on his jumper. When Dudley saw him come down, he broke out into a grin and said, "I knew you would change your mind."

Harry wanted to snap at him, wanted to just walk away, but he just stood there staring, considering how the repercussions would be for attacking his cousin because Dumbledore was a smarmy git and his friends were disloyal pigs.

"Coming or not?" He asked holding out Harry's hand-me-down jumper that had been hanging on the coat-rack since his return to Privet Drive.

Harry sighed, dispelling some of his anger and taking the jumper. Obviously his friends and Dumbledore were not concerned about his well being, why not take his chances with Dudley's friends, they couldn't be worse than Voldemort and Death Eaters after all.

Dudley informed Petunia that he and Harry were going out and not to wait up. Petunia was justifiably concerned and Dudley quelled her fears and the two were on their way (with Aunt Petunia staring holes through Harry's head from the kitchen window watching them walk away till she could no longer make out their outlines in the darkness).

Once Number Four was out of view, Dudley sighed in relief, "She always stares," he said to Harry who was barely listening.

Dudley fished for something in his jumper and finding it, pulled it out and smiled again, "want one?" he asked offering an open pack of cigarettes.

Harry was surprised but he just shook his head 'no'.

Dudley just shrugged and pulled one out for himself, he lit it with a lighter that he placed in the pack and then took a nice, long drag.

"That hits the spot." He said exhaling smoke from his nostrils, Harry, never having been so close to someone smoking before, just stared in fascination.

They walked in silence and Dudley noticed Harry's furtive glances to his cigarette, "have you ever tried one before Harry?"

Harry narrowed his eyes, "Uh... not really, never had the opportunity to be honest."

Dudley gave the same shit-eating grin and pulled out the pack again, he took the lighter and a cigarette out and literally forced it in Harry's hand.

"You've got to try everything at least once Harry, life's too short not to."

That sentence hit a chord with Harry; he stopped struggling with not wanting it and just placed the cigarette in his mouth and lit it. He then turned to Dudley for directions and Dudley just chuckled

"You inhale it Harry, but be careful, first times a—" Harry started violently coughing, "Well that..." Dudley finished lamely.

Harry was about to shove it away but Dudley told him to pull through it, the second puff was equally bad and left a bitter aftertaste, but Harry soldiered on because it meant not having to maintain a conversation with Dudley. By the sixth puff, it stopped feeling terrible and started giving Harry a slightly light-headed feeling. He caught Dudley as his head swam a little bit.

Dudley just chuckled seeing his alarmed but bemused expression,

"Yeah, good times, the first time." Dudley said happily.

By the time Harry finished his first-ever cigarette, they had arrived at their destination, Iain Thomas' house. Dudley explained that Iain was a few years ahead of him at Smeltings and graduated a while back and was now in Uni. He was throwing a house party, so the drinks were free, hence, he was popular, tonight.

Harry had never been to an unmonitored muggle teenage party before, hell, he had never even been to an unmonitored wizard party, so there were many more firsts for him. Loud, heavy music was playing in the background and there were several sweaty people gyrating against each other in the middle of what Harry assumed

was the main foyer of the modest home. To the side was a table laden with drinks that Harry had never seen before.

Dudley pulled him towards the table immediately and began going through the assorted drinks. Harry was cautious around them but when he saw Dudley pick up a suspicious bottle named 'Jack Daniels', pour it into a tiny glass and then drink it at one go, he was interested. Dudley then poured himself another glass and one for Harry. They cheered the glasses and gulped. Scorching hot but horrible tasting liquid descended his throat and Harry gagged but Dudley held his face, chin-up, and forced him to swallow it down.

"Why would people drink that?" Harry asked when his bearings returned to his control and only a fractional aftertaste was retained in his mouth.

Dudley just laughed, "Because of the high Harry, nobody likes the taste, well except for some blokes, but it's what the drinks do to you is what matters."

A picture of some hags stumbling along The Leaky Cauldron from Harry's third year came to mind and Harry shuddered involuntarily. He quickly placed his glass back on the table.

"I think I'll pass." He said loudly, hoping Dudley could catch his voice above the cranked up volume of the new song.

Dudley introduced him to a few of his friends and Harry knew, off the bat, that these 'friends' were exactly like Polkiss, bullies through and through. Harry chose to get lost in the crowd for some time and was mindlessly observing the people in the small room in the semi-darkness.

He was standing against the wall at the back, where none would see him unless specifically trying to. He finally breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hey there," someone said from his immediate left.

Harry jumped in the air and whipped to his side, expecting an impending confrontation only to look into dark green eyes, somewhat similar but still different than his own.

Harry tilted his head and answered, "Uh... hi."

She giggled, so it was definitely a girl! (it was quite dark after all)

"Beth," she said loudly extending her hand.

Harry took it in his own and answered, "Harry."

They then stood there awkwardly after letting go of each other's hand, neither knowing what to say next.

"Um... Want to go outside in the garden?" She asked tentatively.

"What?" Harry asked loudly, the music was getting louder.

"Want to go OUTSIDE?" She yelled over the din.

Harry shrugged and nodded. She led the way and he followed her, locking eyes with Dudley on the way who gave him a thumbs-up and Harry just became more confused.

The garden outside was strewn with empty beer cans and paper glasses, at a certain distance, Harry was quite sure he even saw someone puking...gross.

Beth and he sat down at the far side of the garden, where the lights were considerably dimmer.

Harry tried to see her features properly but under the diffused lighting it was hard, she was a bit shorter than him, her eyes were distinctive, she appeared to have shiny metals pierced in her ears and nose and her tight top made her breasts very distinctive.

Beth just sighed and leaned back, in the evening summer air, her top pulled up just a bit to show off a sliver of skin and Harry's breath caught in his throat.

"So..." She said breaking their awkward silence, "Is there a reason you're all brooding and quiet?"

Harry blushed at her direct comment and just nodded, "Well, you see... um... I..." He didn't really know what to say.

Beth, sensing his hesitance, pulled out a flask tied to her thigh, she opened the lid and took a long sip, she then offered him a drink.

Hesitant at first, Harry accepted it anyway. Mindful of the bitter taste but not surprised Harry had a longer sip; he gagged a bit, but took it down anyway.

That's how they spent the next fifteen minutes, in silence, drinking. When the flask was empty, Beth turned it upside down and a few drops fell out, she shrugged and tied it back to her hip.

"So," she started again, "brooding... why?"

The drink having an effect on loosening his tongue, Harry started telling her more than he ever told anyone before, in abbreviated details of course.

"Let me get this straight," she said after his rant, "A classmate died because of some bastard and you blame yourself?"

He nodded.

"And they want you to do something about it and you rather not?"

Harry thought about her question, his alcohol-addled mind a bit confused, "Well, I would want to... but..."

"But" She asked leaning closer.

"I wish it wasn't my problem," he finished.

Beth giggled, "Then walk away." She said simply.

And there it was. The simplest, most obvious answer that Harry had no response for.

He was pondering her question so he didn't realize when she leaned in closer and her alcohol breath washed over him, "You think too much," she said and then swooped in and kissed him, right on the lips.

Harry was shocked at first, not knowing how to react at all, his first-kiss ever, but Beth seemed undeterred. He soon melted into it and

responded, their lips a little awkwardly smacking against each other. He was even more shocked when after a few minutes of blissful snogging, Beth's hand snaked down to his pants and rubbed him... there. Harry Jr. was at full attention.

Harry froze and Beth pulled back and smiled slyly.

"Let's loosen you up a bit," she said.

As if in a dream, Harry dumbly watched as she unfastened his belt and pulled him out, exposing his erect member to the cold night air. Harry muttered incoherently but that stopped abruptly when Beth swooped down and... Merlin he couldn't believe what she did next.

Slopping, slurping, sucking; Harry's hands unconsciously tangled into her hair, which he realized were a vivid shade of blue, but right about now, he couldn't care. Beth was bobbing her head in his lap with her hand wrapped heavenly round him, doing more than any wank could have ever done.

Harry's eyes rolled back and he splattered himself in her mouth.

When he came to his senses, he looked at her spitting...it... out to her side and wiping her mouth.

"That was...um...fast," she said.

Blood rushed to his cheeks as the implications of what she said struck home.

"Sorry," he said in a small voice, "I've never...um....well."

She chuckled and pulled his pale face towards her own lips and they continued with heavenly snogging.

What started out as a terrible day, ended up being the best night of Harry's young life.

Pain, heavy, terrible pain was all Harry felt as he slowly came to the world. The first thing he did was shielding his eyes against the onslaught of sunlight pouring through the window of his tiny bedroom.

For the first time, Harry wished he had curtains.

Hedwig hooted quietly from the side somewhere and Harry shoved his face under his pillow in an effort to block out the light and noise. His head was surprisingly empty and light-headed. Unfortunately, this made him painfully aware whenever there was even a small sound anywhere in his room. Never before was the slight creaking of floorboards on the staircase under his Uncle's heavy frame so distinctive, never before was his Aunt's high-pitched 'morning voice' so grating on his nerves, never before were Hedwig's hoots sounding like a saw creaking against metal. It was quite painful.

An indeterminable time later, the door creaked open and Harry cringed at the noise, Dudley came into his room and laughed at his predicament of hiding his head under his pillow.

"Congratulations cousin! For the bird last night and your first hangover." He whispered,

"There's some food in the refrigerator for me, you can have it when you're up to it." He said as he shuffled out and closed the door silently.

For the first time, Harry was grateful Dudley was his cousin.

When Harry felt the pain in his head begin to recede, he felt another pain in the pit of his stomach; he needed food, badly. Carefully he got out of his bed and headed straight to the kitchen where he checked the refrigerator for the promised treats. His cousin had in fact left him some beans on toast, to be popped in the microwave, heated and devoured, which Harry promptly did. His hunger sated Harry wondered where his Aunt and Uncle were, since the house was unusually quiet. Shrugging his shoulders, he gathered it wasn't his problem to begin with.

Harry was about to return his room when he realized how plainly awful he smelt; hence he detoured to the bathroom. A liberal hot water shower later, he was squeaky clean and happy to settle in his room for some quiet reading.

No matter how much he tried, his mind constantly went back to Beth and the way she had kissed him and Harry Jr., especially Harry Jr.

Harry went cross-eyed with bliss just thinking about it and by the feeling in his pants, Harry Jr. concurred.

Harry hadn't been this happy in a long time.

After two hours of fruitlessly reading 1001 Herbs and Where to Find Them, Harry replaced the book in his trunk and sat at his desk. He placed both his elbows on the tabletop and rested his head in his hands, sighing happily at the brilliance of the previous evening. His eyes turned and stared fixedly at the bin to the side.

Like a thunder shock, all good humor evaporated as Harry stared at the letters he had thrown away from those who supposedly cared for him. The guilt of Cedric's death came whipping back like never before. He felt disgusted with himself for doing what he did with Beth last night when Cedric's death was still just a month old. He berated himself for thinking life could be simple when the threat of Voldemort was still looming in the air.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, the nagging voice that he often ignored asked the same question again: Why? Why me?

"Then walk away".

Like a jolt Beth's words came surging back to him. He sat up straight and seriously considered what she said; he couldn't do that, as everything he had was here.

Friends who don't correspond, a mentor who ignores, a Dark Lord who never rests, a Godfather who hasn't written once, a school where he fights for his life every year...

Harry grimaced, it was true, taken altogether, it all seemed pretty... terrible. With the way things were going, could he afford to walk away? Dumbledore did tell him there was a reason Voldemort was after him. But if Dumbledore withheld the truth from him so blatantly, why should Harry constantly place his unyielding faith in the Headmaster?

It all boils down to one question, could he actually do this? Should he do this? Simply walk away from it all and never look back?

No. Yes.

'What about my friends?' Harry argued with himself.

'The same ones who left you to fester all summer?' The voice shot back.

'But, they are still my friends; they still support me, with the Philosopher's Stone, with the Chamber of Secrets and even with Sirius in third year. They are loyal and probably have a good reason to not talk to me all summer, Dumbledore forbade them and I know I would've listened to the Headmaster had the situations been reversed.' He reasoned.

'But you faced Quirrel, you fought the basilisk, you braved a hundred dementors, the horntail, Voldemort, you're being driven through the mud in the press, not them.' The voice echoed back and Harry had to agree.

'Their safety means the world to me even if it puts me in jeopardy,' Harry mused.

'But should you stay on and suffer when they don't need you?', Came a counter, 'They have families and support systems; you have the Dursleys... Your friends would be fine if you leave, in fact better since they are no longer linked to you. It would be in their best interests.'

Harry was surprised with himself that he actually justified leaving his friends. In his internal alarm, he scoured for another reason.

'What about Sirius?' Harry thought viciously, 'My godfather, he braved through Azkaban for me!'

'Well, he braved through Azkaban to kill Pettigrew,' Came a snide response.

'But still! He wants to take me in when his name gets cleared—'

'If his name gets cleared.' The voice interrupted.

'I still won't leave him,' Harry said stubbornly, 'he's the only family I've got left that matters'.

'True enough, so will he be next?' The voice said neutrally.

'What?' Harry asked not understanding.

The voice elaborated, 'Whenever Voldemort came for you, someone died: your parents, Cedric, will it be Sirius next?'

Harry sat in shocked silence.

'Or will it be Hermione? Ron? The Weasleys perhaps?' The voice continued.

'What about the wizarding world?' Harry asked now desperately, his hands gripping the edge of his desk so tightly that his knuckles turned white, 'I have a role to play regarding Voldemort, Dumbledore is most insistent about it, but what? Could I abandon the wizarding world too?'

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Harry saw an owl screeching against the window, he rushed to open it and ushered the owl in. He dropped a Knut in its pouch and removed his copy of The Prophet. He carefully unfurled the periodical hoping there would be some mention of a resistance to Voldemort. His hopes were in vain.

The front-page read:

BOY-WHO-LIVED OR THE BOY-WHO-LIED?

DUMBLEDORE: MAD OR EVIL?

MINISTER FUDGE'S STATEMENT: ALL IS WELL

Harry narrowed his eyes in anger as he threw The Prophet into his bin with all the rubbish.

'You were saying?' The voice muttered.

Sod the Wizarding World!

Harry cleared his desk in one swift motion; he pulled out a parchment and a quill and started a title:

The Road to Freedom

Harry Potter had made up his mind.

Two weeks had passed since Harry had devised what he considered his 'ingenious' plan. With endless time to sit and rot alone in his room, Harry employed his considerable intellect on his one sole project: freedom.

The first thing Harry did was to decide whether he wanted to continue living magical or go muggle? That answer was simple since he was searching for a life of anonymity and simplicity. He chose muggle. He went to his Aunt and retrieved his passport. He was in luck because she still kept it with her. One would wonder why his Uncle even bothered commissioning him one. Years ago, when the Dursley family was heading to Majorca, they couldn't get Mrs. Figg to take Harry in for the three weeks they were to go, so Uncle Vernon grudgingly got him a passport. Fortunately for them, Mrs. Figg recovered from her flu just in time to agree to take care of Harry, but his passport had still come in.

It was with considerable happiness that Harry placed that passport in his trunk with his other valuable belongings.

The voice, which Harry was beginning to think was his inner, suppressed Slytherin, was amused by his plan and gave him full support for it.

The next thing Harry had to do was secure his funds and that would be impossible without venturing through Gringotts. After debating and planning for a considerable time, Harry decided to follow his gut and see where the chips lie.

He sent a letter to the over-emotional Weasley matriarch,

Dear Mrs. Weasley,

How are you? I haven't heard from you in a while and I miss your cooking immensely. Nothing beats the famous Weasley treacle tart, that even the Hogwarts elves envy. I was wondering if you could ask Hermione if she could send me some of her fifth-year books on Charms and Transfiguration since she mentioned that she visited

Diagon Alley earlier for her shopping. I'd ask her myself but Hedwig is unwilling to take letters to her for some reason.

With my impending trial and the attitude of our society as of now, I am quite sure that I'm not returning to Hogwarts. With the way Professor Dumbledore is insisting I stay protected, I fear the worst, so I was hoping to pass my time studying but didn't want to buy my own copies, since they would go to waste after they snapped my wand.

I hope to see you soon,

Harry.

With a flourish Harry signed his name and sent it with Hedwig telling her specifically to give it to Mrs. Weasley and no one else.

Harry's plan was a long-shot, but it was the only thing he could come up with. He could only hope that Mrs. Weasley's over-emotional mothering instincts would get the better of her and she would take him to Diagon Alley herself.

He didn't have to wait long, Hedwig returned with a reply the very next morning.

Harry dear,

I am shocked to hear such negative thoughts from you! You will return to Hogwarts come Hell or Heaven if it's the last thing I do. Also I will not be sending you Hermione's books because you will get copies of your own as you will come out of this trial just fine and nobody will dare touch your wand, let alone snap it!

I have spoken to Professor Dumbledore and he tells me that you will be leaving your relatives early next week, but after hearing my concerns, which I relayed to him in a calm, rational manner, he agreed to set up a small guard to take you to the Alley and finish your shopping tomorrow itself.

Also Hermione is very proud of you that you are taking your studies so seriously.

Think positive dear and the world will bend over backwards for you,

Molly.

Harry chuckled to himself; he could only imagine what "calm, rational manner" means when it comes to Molly Weasley.

His laughter abruptly stopped when he thought about what he was doing. He just used Mrs. Weasley as a means to an end. He was planning to abandon her and her family, is that fair?

Harry shook his head, he was not going to have a moral debate with himself again, he had made up his mind, it was not an easy decision, but he was doing right by himself for once in his life.

As Harry entered Diagon Alley from The Leaky Cauldron with Remus, an Auror named Tonks and the real Mad-Eye Moody as his guard, he couldn't help but smile seeing the familiar site. The place was buzzing as usual, with witches and wizards running all over the place and for once no one would recognize him. At his insistence, he had Remus cast a glamour on him and hide his identity, an idea Moody thoroughly approved of (CONSTANT VIGILANCE and all that).

Making their way through High Street, Harry noticed his first destination, The Trunk Shop.

"Professor Lupin?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"Please Harry, call me Remus or Moony, I'm no longer your Professor," He said for the umpteenth time.

"Sorry," Harry said flushed, "Could we go to the trunk shop for a better trunk, my old one has seen better days."

"Shouldn't we go to Gringotts first and withdraw some money?" Tonks asked suspiciously, or maybe not but she seemed suspicious and Harry was on edge as it is.

"No I have enough to get a new trunk with me," Harry said clapping his money bag which jingled with galleons, "and after Gringotts I need to go to Flourish and Blotts and Madam Malkin's which is on the other side of Gringotts, it would make little sense to go back and forth since I have enough now as it is."

He conceded he may have been rambling but his argument was sound and his guard just shrugged and allowed it. Moody and Tonks waited outside while Remus and Harry went inside The Trunk Shop.

Harry noticed a multitude of different trunks in the shop, some simple with standard sizes and one compartment like his old one and then other, more complicated ones that literally had entire mansions inside. He needed one that was somewhere in between.

Remus left Harry to browse and went looking through the shop himself; Harry couldn't have been more relieved.

He went straight to the Sales Clerk, "Excuse me sir, I'm looking for a specific type of trunk."

The Clerk who looked to be in his mid-thirties with graying brown hair and tiny spectacles looked up from his copy of The Prophet and regarded Harry shrewdly.

"Hogwarts?" he asked quietly.

Seeing Remus on the other side of the shop, Harry shook his head,

"No, I'm moving to France, my entire family is," he lied smoothly,

"We're emptying our Gringotts vault and need a trunk with an expanded-space charm that could handle a modest fortune."

"Why not ask the goblins to facilitate the transfer?" The Clerk asked curiously.

Yes, why not? It was a valuable enough suggestion.

"Um... you see," Harry stuttered until the answer hit him like gravity, "high transfer taxes and all, the English goblins are having a bit of a tiff with the French ones and it's spilling over onto our affairs. Transferring it ourselves made more sense in the light of it all." He finished waving his hand.

The Clerk nodded understandingly, "Yes, that makes sense, well we have a specific type of trunk for that," he said pointing to the one at the far end, mahogany-looking but the same size and dimensions

like Harry's old one, "It has two compartments, one normal for muggle purposes and the normal compartment determines the weight of the entire trunk and the second one has the expanded-space charm to hold enough gold that even the Malfoy's would have a hard time filling it." The Clerk finished smiling.

Harry nodded, "How much is it?"

"50 galleons," The Clerk responded.

"I'll give you 65 if you add a wand-sensitive shrinking charm on the top," Harry continued.

"Absolutely, it will take a few minutes, kindly count up the coins as I finish work on your trunk." The Clerk said.

Within a few short minutes, Harry walked out of The Trunk Shop with a miniature trunk in his pocket and instructions that one tap on the lock opens the first compartment and two taps opens the second one, three taps, shrinks and/or enlarges it. Easy as pie.

The quartet entered the large imposing bank of Gringotts and Harry's glamour fell away as they crossed the threshold of the building. Alarmed but unsurprised, his guard just tightened themselves around him.

Harry presented his key to the goblin teller and then was escorted to his vault, he asked his guard to wait for him and they agreed, seeing as none of them wanted to use the Gringotts carts. Moody created a fuss but was satisfied when the goblins ensured that Harry's safety was guaranteed within Gringotts.

One nauseating cart-ride later, Harry stood inside his trust vault, he asked his escorting goblin if having a trust vault meant he had another vault which was his family vault? The goblin calmly answered that because Harry was a minor, his vault was his trust vault, when he attained his majority at 17 the same would be his family vault.

The goblin waited outside as Harry entered his vault and beheld his considerable fortune. Though not exactly as rich as the Malfoy's or Blacks, the Potters were a modest pureblood family with a decent amount of money. Harry dropped his shrunk trunk on the floor,

tapped it three times with his wand and enlarged it. He then tapped the lock twice and opened his enlarged-space compartment.

Then he started grabbing. Piles upon piles of gold and jewelry were thrown inside of his trunk and stored. He was timing himself; he didn't think he needed to take it all, but enough to take care of himself if the need arose. After ten minutes of solidly packing his trunk, the vault was three-fourths bare, he spent another two minutes emptying it and then placed the last vestiges into his money bag for the money he was supposed to withdraw.

When he emerged from the vault with his miniaturized trunk once again in his pocket, his accompanying goblin looked at him strangely but didn't say a word. When back on the main floor of the bank, Moody accosted him and demanded an explanation for his severe tardiness.

"I was seeing my vault thoroughly for the first time. I was wondering if my parents left me anything in there like a library, weapons, secret diaries, pensieve memories, portraits of themselves, that kind of thing." Harry said defensively.

All three of them looked at him sadly but Remus was the one who answered him, "Harry, Gringotts is a bank, not a storage facility, they keep money and valuables and handle assets for liquidation if the need arises, books and weapons are generally forbidden and definitely not portraits."

Harry nodded sadly, he knew that, but he needed to say something to assuage Moody after all. Before leaving he exchanged about half of whatever he withdrew in his moneybag into pound sterling. It amounted to about five thousand pounds, which he kept in his pocket separately.

His minders asked him for the vast muggle money he had taken and he explained that his cousin and he had been bonding recently, but wherever they went, Dudley paid for him, this way he could pay back Dudley for his kindness and pay for himself from now on. No further questions were asked.

After a quick trip to Malkin's and then Flourish and Blott's, the quartet returned to Little Whinging and dropped Harry off at his

relatives. Before leaving, Remus pulled Harry aside and spoke to him.

"Harry, I know living here is hard and what's been said about you recently in the Prophet and by the Ministry is unreasonable, but we are with you and we will get you through this, no matter what."

He then hugged Harry who weakly returned the gesture and apparated away.

Harry was choking up, his plan was on schedule, but... he seriously doubted going thru with it now, could he do this? Should he do this? Does this selfishness become of him?

Harry shuddered and suppressed those thoughts, his decision was made and only death would stop him now, considering his experiences so far, it wasn't much of a foresight to believe it couldn't happen.

The following morning, Harry got up earlier than usual. He opened his new trunk's first compartment and carefully and meticulously placed everything of value into it from his old one. Whether it were books or memoirs or even knick-knacks. When satisfied that all his things were in order, he went to Mrs. Figg's house to figure out who was his guard was for the day, he was hoping it would be Mundungus Fletcher, the same one who had disappeared when the dementors attacked.

Mrs. Figg was kind enough to inform him that Fletcher was banned from "Harry watch" and Moody was on alert as of now and it would be Tonks in the evening. Harry cursed under his breath because Moody could see through his invisibility cloak, but he could possibly get away from Tonks. He thanked Mrs. Figg and went back to Number Four.

"Aunt Petunia?" He asked her hesitantly when he saw her in the kitchen.

She looked surprised he was speaking to her and made a disgusted face, "What do you want?" She spat at him.

"I have a question." He asked carefully.

"Well get on with it!" She said dismissively.

"Do you know how to get to the Airport from King's Cross?"

She looked at him questioningly, "Why do you want to know that?"

Harry racked his brain for a suitable response, why had he not anticipated this line of questioning, "We're having an exchange program at Hog—" she flinched at the name, "at my school and we're headed to France for a few months after term begins."

"Why would your people use an airport?" She asked incredulously and more than a touch suspiciously.

"Our transport services are attached to the airport," Harry made up wildly, "it makes it easier for customs and such," he piled on, "I was just curious."

Petunia seemed unconvinced but just nodded, "You could just take a cab from King's Cross or catch the night bus, it's not hard to get there."

Harry nodded and retreated to his room as fast as he could. Once inside, he picked up the pieces of parchment he had kept ready and started writing his letters. It wouldn't do to disappear without a trace after all.

Now all he had to do was wait.

When night fell, Harry was casually looking out of his window as if looking to the sky, his ears wide open. He heard a faint 'crack' and knew it was apparition. From his vantage point, he saw Tonks hurrying to the bushes overlooked by his room and then he saw Moody retreating. It was only seven o'clock; he had time.

At ten o'clock, he saw that Tonks seemed to be ready to doze off out of boredom. Harry took it as his moment. Carefully gathering his shrunken trunk in his pocket, his passport, some galleons and some pounds in the other. Harry adorned his invisibility cloak and stealthily went down to the kitchen, he dropped the three letters he had written to the Dursleys, one each, as well as a package of letters for his friends on his desk in his room.

Cautiously Harry let himself out the front door and walked. He continued walking till he was a considerable distance away from Number Four. He then held out his wand and flagged the Knight Bus.

Pulling on a jumper and bringing up his hood, Harry hid his scar from the conductor and after paying two galleons was on his way to King's Cross.

In twenty minutes he was at his destination, he then hailed down a cab and got to Heathrow Airport in forty-five minutes. Once there, Harry walked up to the closest teller, made his inquiries, bought his tickets and was in the boarding area in an hour.

At five minutes past one o'clock in the morning, Harry Potter left Wizarding and Muggle England.

At twenty minutes past one o'clock, a very intricate machine in Dumbledore's office stopped spinning.

At forty minutes past one o'clock, Dumbledore entered his office and checked his instruments. When he saw the lack of rotation, he sat down heavily in his chair and put his face in his palm.

What have you done Harry?

Tada! That was the completed Prologue, hope you liked it.

Notes:

1. Because I had some confused reviewers (btw, thanks for reviewing, you guys are awesome!), Harry is NOT headed to France, that was just a cover-story he created off the top of his head to throw off the Sales CLerk at The Trunk Shop. He will not be attending Durmstrang or Beauxbatons for obvious reasons mentioned in the chapter: he is planning on going muggle, attending a magical school (albeit a different one) will be opposite of pursuing that goal.

2. To "mosh" (whoever you are), kindly log-in so I can email you and answer your question next time:

(1) n. A shit eating grin is a very wide and, to the outside observer, stupid looking grin, usually showing smugness, self-satisfaction, or

inner humor. The term is most often seen in the expression "Wipe that shit eating grin off your face!", usually said by the aforementioned outside observer. This observer-based definition makes "shit eating grin" the negative counterpart to "You look like the cat who ate the canary." While the two expressions describe the same grin, they have very different connotations. This definition has nothing to do with the term "shit eater". (2) n. Someone donning a forced smile in an uncomfortable, embarrassing, or compromising situation could be said to have a shit eating grin. Because an uncomfortable situation is much more closely related to "eating shit" than smugness, it is plausible to assume that this is the first definition, although far from the most common, and that the above definition is a result of drift from this one. Both of these uses are documented in the Oxford English Dictionary no earlier than 1957.

(1) Upon telling Elaine he knew a secret, Jerry donned a shit eating grin and refused to reveal it.

(2) Forced to admit defeat, the politician managed a shit eating grin as he called for an end to "bipartisan rhetoric".

Next chapter: People's reactions and their letters. The biggest question of all: Where is Harry Potter?

Drop a REVIEW and make my day.

~ Gatonio.

CHAPTER ONE

HELLO GOODBYE

You say 'yes',

I say 'no',

You say 'stop',

And I say 'go, go, go',

Oh no.

You say 'goodbye',

When I say 'hello',

Hello hello.

I don't know why you say 'goodbye',

I say 'hello'.

Hello Goodbye ~ The Beatles

6.30 AM

Beep. Beep. Beep.

A long, bony hand moved with practiced ease and lightly pressed the button atop the alarm clock. Once the required three beeps were sounded, the hand retracted and retook its place beside the body of its owner. A pale, horsey face with lanky brown hair pulled back in rollers sat up in the bed.

The woman took a deep breath, pulled back the blanket and then placed her feet on the floor, her left foot going into her left slipper and right foot going into the right... carpet. Where was her right slipper?

She looked around wildly and found it on the other side of her left foot. She placed it on her right foot, while internally cursing the day. Nothing good would happen now.

Petunia Dursley hated when her morning ritual was disturbed.

She swiftly put on her morning robe, headed to the adjoining bathroom and brushed her teeth, flossed, and took an invigorating shower. Sufficiently groomed and maintained to look the part of the perfect housewife, Petunia promptly headed down to her kitchen to start preparing breakfast for her two men.

Once inside, she took a moment to gaze at her safe haven, her kingdom. The reason behind her gaze was simple: the freak was home and she needed to make sure he didn't steal any food or utensils whilst she was otherwise occupied. Everything seemed in order and Petunia smiled to herself.

She proceeded to the refrigerator and removed the various food items she would need to make breakfast; she was in the mood for bacon and eggs today. She left the eggs on the kitchen table as she decided to start with the bacon first.

She carefully but quickly set the pan down in its proper spot and was about to turn back to the stove, but stopped in her tracks. She turned around suspiciously to see three nondescript-looking envelopes lying on her gleaming tabletop. Each envelope had a different name written on the front.

She gingerly picked up the one that said 'Aunt Petunia' in what she knew to be her nephew's somewhat legible scrawl.

She sat down on her white chair in her clean kitchen as she opened the envelope only to grimace upon seeing that freakish parchment-paper fall out. Honestly, you would think for all their supposed greatness, these... wizards... would upgrade to the twentieth century.

She picked up the parchment, however disdainfully, and turned it over to see the short but honest message written there:

Dear Aunt Petunia,

I hope this letter finds you well. By the time you read this, I should probably be far, far away from England and definitely Little Whinging. If it stays up to me, I will never be returning to your home again, so you should take this moment to celebrate because I'm gone for good.

Despite all the things you put me through over the years, I will still thank you for taking me in on that morning when I was dropped at your doorstep. You didn't have to, but you did.

I wish you and your family the best of luck and would like to warn you that when my minders learn of my absence they will take your home by storm and turn it upside down. Consider it my parting gift for all that we've been through together.

Harry Potter

Petunia squished the letter in her left hand, her right now gripping the table's edge to keep herself steady.

The freak was gone, forever, by the looks of it; but now what about her family? His magic and her blood protected all four of them from that cultist leader freak, and now that Harry had declared he was leaving (and had in fact already left) permanently, where would that leave her?

Bits and pieces of information started adding up in Petunia's mind.

"Aunt Petunia, may I have my passport?"

"Do you know how to get to the airport...?"

The boy had left the country, without a trace! By now he could be halfway around the world!

All good humor evaporated and Petunia shot out of the kitchen chair, running up the stairs and careening into her room at breakneck speed. She pulled open her armoire and started pulling various articles of clothing at the top. Helter-skelter fell various clothes, shirts, pants and skirts as Petunia determinedly searched amongst it all. A few tense minutes later she found what she was looking for. She gingerly pulled it out of the little slot she had placed it in all those years ago: an envelope, with a letter inside written on that same type of parchment-paper.

Petunia hesitantly opened the letter and read it. As if all the life had been drained out of her, her face grew paler and paler to an unhealthy white. A sheen of nervous sweat covered her brow and she unwillingly sunk to the ground, the letter falling from her fingers as the implications of what she saw therein were absorbed, her eyes staring forward at apparently nothing on the wall of her bedroom.

7.00 AM

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Vernon Dursley grunted unhappily as his daily alarm went off, his large frame rose up in bed, the supports straining under his whale-like frame. He deftly smacked the alarm off, a practiced ease born from years of routine. He squinted his beady eyes and wiggled his moustache, then parted his lips into a large yawn. His meaty arms were raised in the air as he stretched his tired joints and brought himself to attention.

His mind immediately moved to thoughts of breakfast and what his dear wife would have prepared for his breakfast today. After all, it is the most important meal. The bed strained threateningly as Vernon placed his feet on the ground beside him, putting on his bedroom slippers and raising himself, the bed rising from the absence of his weight.

Vernon rubbed his eyes and was about to move to the bathroom for a thorough cleanse, his morning stubble beginning to bother him, when he noticed something out of place. On the other side of the bedroom, in front of a half-open armoire, with various pieces of clothes lying haphazardly around, sat Petunia. She seemed to be in a daze, her face stretched into an expression of blankness, her left hand lying lifelessly away from the rest of her crouched body, a large sheath of paper beside it.

"Petunia, are you all right?" Vernon asked uncertainly, his voice a bit raspy in the morning.

She didn't even move. Vernon's eyebrows furrowed in consternation, his face pulling into an expression of confusion mingled with worry and mounting fear: something was bothering his darling Pet.

He lumbered towards her and crouched down beside her with considerable effort, placing his hands on his knees, he moved his head towards her and tried again, "Pet, love, are you all right?"

Still nothing.

Vernon took one of his meaty palms and placed it firmly on her shoulder and shook her. Petunia seemed to break out of her stupor and turned to Vernon with wild eyes.

"Pet, what's wrong?" He asked worriedly.

"Vernon, dear Lord, we need to get out of here, fast!" She said rapidly. "He's gone, he's upped and left, the freak! We need to leave before they get to us!"

Now Vernon was even more confused, "Pet, calm down and explain what happened to me." He said trying to placate her.

Petunia pointed towards the paper lying nearby with a shaking hand. Vernon gingerly picked it up and ironed it out, then began to read.

Dear Petunia,

I wish this letter would bring better news, but unfortunately, it is my duty to inform you of something rather tragic. Your sister, Lily, has died.

A most evil wizard by the name of Voldemort attacked her and her husband, James, last night. Miraculously, your nephew, Harry, survived this ordeal. Both your sister and brother-in-law, fell prey to a most vicious curse called 'The Killing Curse,' it is unpreventable and considered Unforgivable. None have ever survived this curse - that is, before Harry. The only remnant of Voldemort's attack is the distinctive lightning-bolt scar on his forehead.

Voldemort is not completely dead, and in my opinion, he will return someday, and when he does, he will aim to attack your nephew, and by extension, yourself and your family.

Lily, the remarkable woman that she was, enacted a sacrifice most powerful in her final moments. The magic she wrought from her sacrifice has created a protection of blood around Harry. As long as

Harry is living with one who shares his mother's blood, the protection of his mother will blossom and shroud those of his home from any ill intent. Its potency is at a level that even Voldemort, when he returns, will be unable to breach.

As long as Harry Potter calls Number Four Privet Drive his home, you are protected.

Below is a sample of Lily's enchanted blood. It is advisable you store this letter. As long as Lily's blood is visible, you will know that the protection she gave Harry is alive and functioning.

Sincerely,

Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.

Vernon finished the letter with a raised eyebrow, he knew this letter; it had accompanied the freak when he had been unceremoniously dumped on his doorstep. He also remembered the shocked outrage and distaste that both his wife and he felt when they saw a large rectangular slab of red at the bottom of the letter - his late sister-in-law's blood.

There was no such slab there anymore. It was gone.

Which means, which means... Dear Lord! The protection is gone!

She walked as if in a daze, her eyes crossed in worry, her lips quivering as if she were ready to break out in tears at any moment. Her cheeks held evidence of tearstains and she walked at a sedate pace behind a wizard with a stump of a leg.

"There's no point in blaming yerself, lass," the retired auror said gruffly.

He had not turned his head, but she knew he had seen her through his skull with his enchanted eye.

The witch nodded glumly and shuffled on. She still had no idea how this could have happened on her watch. She was supposed to mind

him. She was supposed to keep a lookout and she failed. The Boy-Who-Lived was missing and it was all her fault.

She didn't even notice when she had walked through the door of the kitchen, she stood listlessly in front of the chair she normally occupied as she was absorbed in her thoughts of guilt and regret, oblivious to the sympathetic looks and furtive glares (mostly from Molly Weasley) shot in her direction.

"Nymphadora!" A calm, clear voice pierced through her gloomy thoughts, and Tonks shook her head, her hair changing of its own volition from a mousy black to a more normal (for her) dark violet.

"Yes?" She responded, half-confused, half-angry. She looked up instead of at the ground, looking for the one who dared to call her by her first name. Despite her lack of cheer, she would still skin anyone alive for doing that.

"Perhaps you would like to take a seat," finished Professor Dumbledore.

Tonks blushed. She would skin alive anyone for calling her by her first name, except Professor Dumbledore.

She quickly got into her seat, knocking over the cup of tea kept ready for her. She swore furiously under her breath as the first instances of sniggers filled the room.

"It's all right Tonks," Remus said gently. "I'll get you more tea. Sit down."

Tonks smiled thankfully and took her seat (miraculously) without further incident.

Remus bustled around with the kettle of tea while Dumbledore regarded her with a keen look. Tonks squirmed under his gaze. When Remus returned with her cup, set it down beside her, and had retaken his seat, Dumbledore broke his unblinking gaze and turned to the group at large.

"As some of you already know, we meet today under unfortunate circumstances. Despite a round-the-clock watch, Mr. Potter has managed to hoodwink the Order and run away. With—"

"—Or he was kidnapped," came a resolute voice from Dumbledore's left.

Every eye turned to face the speaker. Dumbledore just sighed.

"Sirius, I understand your sentiments, but I speak with incontrovertible evidence. The Wards around Privet Drive have failed, utterly. There are only two precedents of that happening: either Mr. Potter is no longer in the land of the living or he has irrevocably severed his ties with his relatives and their home by running away with no intentions of ever returning. Seeing as my indicators monitoring Mr. Potter's health are fully-functional and showing him to be in peak physical condition, we must defer to the latter option." Dumbledore explained, his expression looking pained and aged.

Sirius look torn, but his lips were set into a thin line and his hands crossed in front of his chest. No matter what, he refused to believe his godson would even think of running away.

"Why am I not surprised that the son of a Marauder decides to pull a prank in even such serious times," came a silky voice from the back of the room.

Severus Snape sneered, and the look on his face was a mixture of reserved confusion and disdain.

Sirius slammed his fist on the table in front of him and swirled his head to look directly into Snape's eyes. "Look here, Snivellus, Harry would never run away! It's obvious something nefarious is afoot."

"As the Headmaster pointed out, Black, the evidence of his running away are incontrovertible and secondly - 'nefarious,' I must commend your efforts at widening your vocabulary, I am truly surprised you're capable of complex thought." Snape finished viciously.

Sirius snarled and stood up, his wand pointed towards Snape, and Snape copied his movements. Both wandtips glowed red with anticipation.

"ENOUGH!" boomed Dumbledore. "Sirius, Severus, as I have asked you before, I ask you again, leave your childhood nemesis in the past and join the world of adults once and for all. We have to find Mr. Potter rather than argue amongst ourselves! Now put away your wands and sit down!"

Resentfully, and glaring daggers at each other, both men did as instructed.

Dumbledore then resumed his seat and, without looking at her, indicated with his hand for Tonks to rise.

Understanding the implication, Tonks sat up straight in her chair, took a deep breath and stood up. The chair she was sitting on toppled over behind her.

"Cor," she swore lightly as she turned around and picked up the chair and while doing so knocked over her second teacup in five minutes.

"Really, Tonks, you ought to try to be more careful," Molly Weasley said, annoyed, as Remus cleaned the mess with a swish of his wand.

Thus, it was a considerably mollified Tonks that recounted her experience from the night before.

Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine...

Well that was as far as she could count streetlights from her vantage point in the bushes, especially in the night. Tonks was rather proud of herself because last time she spotted only twenty-five.

She sighed irritably. This was not what she considered to be a glamorous use of her free time. She initially joined the Order of the Phoenix to do some good and be effective in taking the war to You-Know-Who and the Death Eaters despite the inefficiency of the Ministry. Spending three nights a week in a bush 'guarding' a morbid teenager was not what she had in mind.

Nevertheless, she had chosen the Order on her own free will, and Dumbledore was a great man for a reason. If he deemed the Boy-

Who-Lived a number one priority, then so be it. Who was she to argue? After all, this was the Harry Potter.

Yet some nights, like this one, Tonks couldn't help but curse the fruitlessness of her job. If only she knew why a not-even-fifteen-year-old had better security than even the Minister of Magic. Alas, these questions warranted answers that her station was not privy to.

'Suck it up, Tonks,' she reminded herself as she got comfortable in her sleeping bag and re-applied a warming charm. 'This is important, no matter what you think...'

Time passed, slowly but steadily and Tonks was finding it harder and harder to keep her eyes open. At one point she shook her head quickly when she felt herself nodding off yet again. She stood up and stretched her legs, then did a quick sweep of the area as Moody had suggested and then checked the time.

It had only been three hours; her shift still had not ended...

'Merlin help me!'

Tonks resettled herself into her customary position and started counting streetlights again.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten....

Tonks yawned loudly and rubbed her tired eyes.

Eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, six-sixteen, sev-ven-teen... eighteen...

...

...

...

"NYMPHADORA! CHECK THE HOUSE IMMEDIATELY!"

Tonks was jostled awake by a loud voice and she looked up, her wand ready in her hand pointing towards the source of the noise. What she saw was a blinding silvery-white phoenix patronus with its

wide wings spread in an intimidating pose, its shimmering body hovered regally in midair, and lit the surrounding area in an eerie glow. Its empty grey eyes regarded her shrewdly with its beak open as if crying.

"NYMPHADORA! CHECK THE PREMISES AND DETERMINE MR. POTTER'S WHEREABOUTS!"

Tonks got to her feet within seconds, wand clutched in one hand. She made a mad dash towards Number Four, all vestiges of fatigue long gone. As she approached the front door, she silently cast a disillusionment charm on herself and then silenced her body using a modified Silencio. With a mentally incanted 'Alohomora', the door clicked open and Tonks raced up silently, not even hitting or knocking over anything in her wake; too alert and worried out of her mind to make such a mistake.

She careened into the smallest room and wrenched open the door. The sight was not heartening.

An empty trunk, which she knew to be Harry's old one, was lying open at the foot of the bed, which was stripped of its sheets, and the pillow gone as well.

Tonks rushed towards one of the two other pieces of furniture in the room: the cupboard. One of its doors was cracked open, like someone had not closed it properly while in a rush. She swiftly pulled it open, hoping at this point to even be confronted with haphazardly thrown-in clothes. Unfortunately, on inspecting the tiny cupboard, Tonks discovered that all of Harry's clothes were gone, even the spare sheets and blankets that his Aunt stored were missing.

Tonks started walking backwards as the implications of what she saw began to set in. Her breath became erratic and she clasped her hands together in front of her chest as her fear mounted.

'No, no, it couldn't be, definitely not, not on my watch, impossible!'

Two large steps back and Tonks hit the back of her leg to Harry's old trunk. She squeaked and turned with her wand drawn, her hand now shaking. Seeing the trunk she exhaled with relief and looked inside. The trunk had few things inside, some broken artifacts: a

Sneakoscope, some worn-out quills, old and mouldy socks, and the like.

There was nothing in there worth keeping. No books, no personal effects, nothing, just junk. Rubbish you would throw out when separating... oh Merlin; Tonks' hand flew to her gaping mouth... when separating what's important from what's not, something you do when moving.

Her mouth still covered, Tonks' eyes moved to the tiny table and rickety chair in the corner. The table was covered with papers, a small sheaf of parchments were neatly stacked on one side, Tonks was about to inspect it when her eyes were inexorably drawn to the one large parchment lying on top of everything else.

This parchment had a lot of writing on it, a lot of things written and then crossed out, and replaced with more writing. There was a finished list of bullet points at the bottom of the sheet; all the points were ticked to signify completion. But what caught Tonks' attention and confirmed her biggest fear was the title on the parchment: The Road to Freedom.

Tonks sat down heavily on the bare bed with the large parchment now clasped in her shaking hands as she read and reread what was written. It was a series of systematic ideas and instructions to escape promptly before any suspicion was roused. By the looks of things, it had succeeded.

Time passed, every second moved on frustratingly quicker than the one before and Tonks was running out of ideas to try and fix this mess.

Tears leaked out of her eyes: she thought she was above Harry-watch, she wanted something more glamorous, and now, her own negligence could cost the Light the Boy-Who-Lived.

All because she couldn't stay awake.

With tears staining her face, Tonks sent off a Patronus to Professor Dumbledore. He would get the message within a few moments, but the situation was still bleak.

Tonks sat back in the bed, the lower half of her body dangling off the edge, her position eerily similar to the previous resident of the very same room as she considered what she could do.

She didn't have any ideas...

Merlin help them all...

Finishing her report was harder than she would have imagined it to be. As she sat down, she risked a look in Sirius' direction. He was huddled up against himself and his lips were constantly muttering at a very low decibel, as if talking to himself, his head shaking in disbelief every few seconds.

The others in the room were silent as well, each of their thoughts introspective as they considered the gathered evidence.

Dumbledore cleared his throat after a considerable time had elapsed and then produced the same parchment that Tonks had mentioned.

"This is what Nymphadora had located in Mr. Potter's room and confirmed what we fear to be his plan of escape from his relatives' home." He said, passing around the said parchment to his immediate left.

When it was in Mr. Weasley's hand, he gave it a cursory glance, but then his breath caught in his throat as he read point two and then point eight.

Dumbledore looked at him worriedly, "Is there something you've discovered, Arthur?"

Arthur nodded heavily as Molly held onto his hand tightly, encouraging him to speak.

"He mentioned regaining his passport from his aunt and then heading to an airport as his leaving point." Mr. Weasley said in a whisper.

Tonks' eyes widened as the implications of what he said sunk in. She had read the paper before but what was written never really registered, her eyes were glued just to the title at the time. Looking

around the room, she noted several looks of confusion instead of horror.

"Perhaps you would care to elaborate, Arthur?" He asked in a deceptively calm voice.

Arthur nodded, "When muggles travel beyond England, when they wish to visit other countries, their documentation of their nationality and such is determined by means of an official-looking booklet that is different for every country, called a passport. The swiftest way of international travel today among muggles is through an airport, where they use airplanes to fly. If Harry has indeed gone through with his plan, it is safe to assume he is no longer within the British Isles and we have no magical means to track him."

Dumbledore sat back in his chair, his head lowered perceptibly as he pondered this new development.

A small chuckling sound was heard from the back and everyone turned to face Severus, from whom the sound was emanating. "The boy does have something in that head after all. Wouldn't his Gryffindor father be proud of his very Slytherin-esque escape?"

Sirius growled as he jumped out of his chair and lunged towards Snape, his hand clasping around Snape's neck in an effort to strangle him. Before Snape could even reach his wand, it was knocked away by the impact of Sirius' landing. Both men fell to the ground, Sirius on top, and struggled with each other, with the chair Snape had just been forced to vacate topping over to the other side.

Two flashes of red light were shot from Dumbledore's wand and they were both summarily stunned. Dumbledore shook his head tiredly as they were levitated and dropped outside of the kitchen of Grimmauld Place.

"Is there any way to track him, Arthur?" Dumbledore asked finally.

Mr. Weasley, still dazed by the rather sudden brawl that was equally anticlimactically ended, turned to Dumbledore with a pensive expression. "Muggle authorities are very organized with their work. They probably have the paperwork of where Harry is headed. However, with the Ministry's position as it is towards yourself and

Harry, I find it hard to believe they would expend any resources to find him."

Molly spoke from his side. "Albus, what about his trial? When The Prophet learns of his absence, they will have a field day, the kind of things they will say about him are unprecedented. We would be lucky if he ever came back after such declarations."

Dumbledore nodded with a deep frown on his face, "I know, Molly, I know, but there is only so much we can handle at one time. I will look into some of my contacts with Muggle authorities to try and locate our wayward Mr. Potter. It isn't much, but any help or lead would be helpful as of now."

A few more matters were discussed; Voldemort's unusual quiet was also briefly touched upon.

"Professor Dumbledore?" Tonks asked, as it seemed the meeting was coming to a close.

"Yes?" He looked at her kindly.

"What about the Dursleys? Is the watch at Number Four still in effect?" Tonks presented her query.

Dumbledore didn't answer as he considered his options, "Seeing as we are already stretched thin with monitoring Voldemort and now also searching for Mr. Potter who could be anywhere, we can no longer keep a strict watch on them. We must hope for their best, and that is all we can do."

In other words, their death warrant had been signed.

"Molly," Dumbledore said, "will you kindly reawaken our friends outside? I have some assignments for them that they must be aware of."

Molly nodded absently and stood from her seat to head outside the kitchen. Her mind was still reeling with the idea that Harry had run away and that they had no way of tracking him - no way whatsoever, unless he used magic.

Once outside, she swished her wand and with two quick 'Ennervate's. Snape and Sirius were awakened and bid to enter.

Molly too was about to re-enter when the fireplace in the Main Hall blazed alive with green flames.

"Is anyone there? I have an important message to deliver!"

"Dudders, go get your things and hurry down." Petunia said in her loud voice as she submerged her hands in yet another box to place more items within.

Dudley sighed as he was forced yet again to abandon his favourite past time (watching the telly) to go to his room and bring down more things to pack.

Walking up the stairs rapidly (he didn't want to give his mother a chance to give him more work after all), Dudley entered his room and began picking up another armload of clothes, magazines and various knick-knacks he wanted packed.

It was odd really; his cousin had disappeared without a trace and the next day his parents planned a move. It had barely been three days, what if Harry returned only to find them gone? At this point, he didn't really know what to think about his cousin, he thought they were getting along fine; maybe he could have just left a message, something. It was only polite if he planned on disappearing. But he had left without a trace or even a goodbye.

Dudley calmly walked towards the staircase only to stub his foot on something on the ground and have his things cascade down as well. He cursed under his breath and began loading things again, his musings returning to his cousin. From the corner of his eye, he saw one of his favorite miniature footballs (a souvenir from the World Cup his father took him to) roll away and into his parents' room.

Dudley sighed tiredly and followed the rolling ball inside. He deposited his belongings on his parents' bed and bent over to reach for the ball that had rolled under it. Stretching his hand, he clasped the ball firmly in his grip and then withdrew with it in hand.

He got onto one knee to heave himself up and rested his left arm on the bedside table to give himself support. That's when his hand came in contact with a familiar yet odd kind of paper.

Once back on his own two feet, Dudley looked at the paper with a creased brow, wondering what it was. He picked it up and began to read:

Dear Aunt Petunia,

I hope this letter...

Dudley's eyebrows shot to his hairline. So Harry had left a letter behind, and his mother had blatantly lied to him when he asked. He read his cousin's letter to his mother and was disappointed to note that it held no clues as to where he was. However, his cousin's implied message of his people searching the house never came to fruition. Maybe they didn't know he was gone yet? They'd be worried sick if he never went back to that school! Then they would come investigating and see the Dursleys gone as well.

Dudley knew then that he had to do something.

He put the letter down from where he picked it up only to notice two more letters lying there, one addressed to 'Uncle Vernon' and the second simply said 'Dudley.'

Smiling slightly, Dudley gingerly raised the letter meant for him, his anger towards his mother doubling for hiding it from him.

He took out the inner parchment and sat down on his mother's bed, then began to read:

Dear Dudley,

Sorry mate, I didn't tell you I was leaving. But the whole point of running away is going away unannounced so I hope you understand.

As far as where I'm headed is concerned, let me just say that I'm headed far, far away from England and all the mess that I've left behind there. I sat down one night and thought about it, and realized that me being gone would be in everyone's best interests. At least your mum and dad would agree.

I was hoping you could do me a favour, Dudley, like for your parents and you. I left a stack of letters for my friends on the side of my desk in my room. When my minders come a-knocking, just make sure they get them.

Thanks a lot Dudley, for everything.

I hope we meet again someday.

Your cousin,

Harry

Dudley blinked owlishly as he read and reread the letter addressed to him. So his cousin was actually gone, for good.

Well, he would do well on the favour his cousin asked of him. But his minders never came, so what about those letters he left for his friends?

Of course!

Dudley shot out of his parents' room, leaving all his things still lying on their bed and swept into his cousin's old room. Once inside, he headed straight for the desk and looked around carefully, mindful to not disturb anything.

Just like his cousin had mentioned in his letter, off to one side of the desk was a thick sheaf of parchments, each one folded, some thicker than others with a name printed on the top.

Dudley carefully picked up the entire sheaf. Making sure he didn't forget any letter, Dudley ran down the stairs, the floorboard reverberating and groaning threateningly under his weight as he opened the front door and headed to the one person whom he knew was associated with 'them.'

Three quick raps on the door and he heard a faint "coming" from the other side. A few minutes passed as Dudley tried to catch his breath from the run that he had just made. The door creaked open and in the doorway stood batty Mrs. Figg.

She had two shawls draped around her shoulders (even though it was in the middle of the afternoon in summer) and a weird-looking white cat in her arms. Her eyes looked drawn and tired and her face sallow.

Upon seeing Dudley at her doorstep she seemed surprised.

"Mr. Dursley, this is awfully unexpected. What may I do for you?" She said in her wobbling old woman voice.

Dudley, having finally caught his breath and calmed his pulse, answered, "Mrs. Figg, I know you were keeping an eye on Harry and are with those... um... people."

If this worried her, she didn't show it.

Dudley calmly handed her the parchments, which she accepted with only a slight frown.

"I don't know if you're aware, but Harry ran away, he's been gone for a while. Mum and Dad are packing, we're moving. The morning after he left Dad went in and asked for a transfer, we're moving to Australia where Dad is going to be the head of a new branch of his company. Harry left these letters for his friends, he asked me to make sure it got to them when they came searching the house, but they never came and I thought I could pass it on to you." Dudley rambled on.

Mrs. Figg's eyes widened in surprise and she regarded the letters with a sort of shock, then she schooled her features and nodded in thanks.

"Thank you Mr. Dursley. I will make sure these letters get into the right hands."

Dudley nodded uncertainly, disappointed by her lack of reaction. As she closed the door, Dudley turned around and headed back to his home to finish packing. He would have words with his mother later about hiding letters that were meant for him.

Upon closing the door, Mrs. Figg dropped her façade of calm and rushed to her fireplace. She threw in her floo-powder and shouted

for Order Headquarters. Sticking her head in the fireplace she called out to the House. Someone would hear her.

"Is anyone there? I have an important message to deliver!"

Molly turned around and rushed to the floo.

"Arabella? Is something the matter?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

Through the green flames she saw Mrs. Figg regard her with relief, "Molly, thank goodness you're here, Harry's cousin, Dudley, just came by. It seems Harry left behind letters for his friends, and there might be a clue to finding him! Now, you must hand them to Dumbledore."

Molly's jumped at the news, "Pass the letters through, Bella, we're having an Order meeting now! I'll just pass it on immediately."

With a nod and a quick word of thanks, Mrs. Weasley dashed back towards the kitchen with the letters in hand.

"Albus!" She called in her loud voice, the talking and whispering around the table ceased and Dumbledore turned towards her with questioning eyes.

"Is something the matter, Molly?" He asked calmly.

She held up the letters and her hand shook with anticipation, "Harry left letters for us all, Arabella just passed them on."

Chaos broke lose and people got up and rushed towards Molly to take a look at the letters, Sirius leading the charge and Snape remaining unmoving with only the barest hint of a smirk on his face.

"Back off!" Molly said threateningly, pointing her wand at them as if they were wolves, "He's sent them for his friends and those he considers close, we get to read them first!"

Dumbledore came forward and made sure everyone was back in his or her seat, he then turned to Molly who still stood with her wand pointed and breathing heavily.

"To whom has he addressed letters, Molly?" Dumbledore asked tranquilly.

Seeing that the danger had passed, Molly sat down again and began leafing through the envelopes.

"There's one for Ron, another for Hermione, and one for the twins. Here's one for you, Remus," she said, handing Remus his letter. Lupin gladly snatched it and began reading avidly.

"Sirius," she said absently passing one to the man to her right who began reading the letter like a man finding an oasis in a desert.

"Arthur," she said calmly, handing him his and then she took the next one for herself and kept it aside.

"This last one's for you, Albus," she finished, and Dumbledore took his letter as well.

With those with letters reading and those without twiddling their thumbs, Molly took a deep breath and picked up her letter.

She charily opened her letter and began to read.

Dear Mrs. Weasley,

I don't know what you must be thinking of me right now, and I'm sorry if I've disappointed you.

I've been doing a lot of thinking this summer and I came to the decision that leaving was the best option. Voldemort is after me, and there is literally a sign carved on my head marking me as his target. Everyone I'm around and associate with is in jeopardy.

If that's not enough, the Ministry seems adamant in making me out to be a liar and attention-seeker. I remember my days in Second Year when everyone thought I was the Heir of Slytherin – it was a difficult time. Even Ron and Hermione were cold-shouldered for months for staying on my side. I don't want to put anyone through that experience again. I don't want to be victimized by the Ministry for acting out in self-defence against Dementors.

Thank you for accepting me into your home with open arms and no preconceived notions. I will always value you for all that you've done for me and for letting me be a part of your family.

I hope to see you again someday without the threat of Voldemort looming over my forehead and the tension of war making our lives hard.

Please don't search for me, and try not to worry either. I'll find my way wherever I am.

Love,

Harry

A few tears unconsciously fell from her eyes as she reread the letter. Now they knew for sure, Harry was indeed gone.

"These letters are a forgery!" Sirius opposed vehemently.

Dumbledore silenced him with a look, he then removed his wand, and swirled it around his own letter, and it began to glow and settled to a calm blue.

Dumbledore sighed, "This letter is genuine and was not written under any form of duress or pressure."

Sirius growled angrily, he clutched his letter tightly in his hand and walked out the door, slamming it behind him.

"Well, did the lad leave any clues to find him, Albus?" Moody asked, losing his patience.

"Nothing to indicate so in mine. His letter was rather, well, honest, and just said goodbye. Nothing more." He then turned to the others. "Molly, Arthur, Remus, anything useful in yours?"

Molly looked up from hers and shook her head in the negative. Arthur and Remus followed suit.

Dumbledore placed his hands on the table in resignation.

"We have no choice then but to look as best as we can for young Mr. Potter." He raised himself in one elegant sweep from his place and moved towards the fireplace in the Main Hall.

Thus, however dishearteningly, the Order meeting was concluded.

He sat back in his chair and regarded the seedy room with only slight distaste. It was an okay sort of place, really, calling it "seedy" was being unfair, but there still was an undertone of danger in this place.

A modest single bed was pushed to the side; a large, empty floor-space dominated the main area of the room that was covered in bits and pieces of parchments and various books. To one side was a sink with a newly purchased toothbrush and toothpaste lying in a plastic cup. To the other side was a door that led to an exit from the small room. All things considered, it was still bigger than his old room, if only marginally.

He sighed lightly and stretched in his chair. He had been reading up on the country and its culture all night. Needless to say that his young appearance roused considerable suspicion on arriving here, but with the right amount of money and in an obscure enough motel, there wasn't much opposition to his presence.

He turned back to his book, the book that had given him the idea of coming to this place to begin with - the very same book that he had never looked at since first year: A History of Magic by Bathilda Bagshot.

The passage read:

No diplomatic crisis has ever had consequences as far-reaching as that between the Magical Ministries of Britain and Romania. In 1776, Gorvick the Terrible killed an entire contingent of British wizards travelling in Bessarabia, the British ministry's ultimatum for redress was ignored and in response, the British Ministry deported all Romanian Nationals and barred their further entry.

Thus started a seemingly never-ending war of wills and snubs between the two countries. What started as a resolvable diplomatic crisis, turn into a two century long silence and tension that continues to this day.

The deterioration of relations has reached the extent that there is no exchange of communication or news between the two countries, each existing peacefully and entirely separately from the other.

Perhaps someday, the burnt bridge can be restored.

Further reading on Romania and their magical history, see page 1,037.

That was all the prompting Harry needed.

He closed the book and stood up from the chair, stretching himself out some more because it had been an exceptionally long night.

He moved towards his bed and quickly fell asleep.

It had been a week since his departure, one entire week since he severed his ties with all that was old and familiar and treaded into an unfamiliar world.

When the sun came up, Harry rose, stretching his body and yawning deeply, dark circles were visible under his eyes, but it wasn't like he could do much about it.

After taking a quick shower, he grabbed his quills and parchment and stuffed them in the backpack he picked up at the Romanian Street of Magic. He said a quick 'bye, I'll be back in the evening' to the patron of the inn at the front desk and headed out back. Buying some crisps and a bottle of water on the way, Harry had had a satisfactory breakfast as he quickened his pace. He stopped in front of a large statue in the middle of Bucharest. It was still early and no one was about. Three quick raps on the hindquarters of the statue and it shook and opened and Harry descended.

After arriving at Bucharest airport, the first thing Harry did was convert his money into Romanian lei. He then started his search around Romania.

That first night out in town, Harry roamed around the city. There were quite a few people there who spoke broken English, so it wasn't half-bad. A little time exploring, some more spent sight-

seeing, but Harry was slowly coming to a stark realization: he had nothing to do and no one to turn to.

The plan to run away was all well and good and the idea to start a Muggle life somewhere was even better, but how was he supposed to cope? He had no useful skills as a Muggle, in fact, before his Hogwarts letter; he was pretty useless at school as well.

So now what?

It was during this deep musing on his first night out that Harry was roaming around in one of the seedier parts of Bucharest.

Walking and thinking, he didn't even realize when he ran into someone.

Taking a few steps back, Harry looked at the unfortunate soul he knocked down and helped him up, "Um... Sorry about that."

The person, looked like a child, but his face was that of a man. He got up angrily and dusted himself off, looking in Harry's direction menacingly. He had vibrant purple eyes and was approximately Flitwick's height. At first Harry thought he was part goblin, but on closer inspection, Harry knew he was just a Muggle, with dwarf-like height.

The little man growled in his direction and said something in Romanian; Harry didn't understand a word.

"Um, right, I'll just be going." Harry said uncertainly, he turned around only to bump into someone else, someone who was most definitely not a dwarf.

Harry gulped involuntarily as he was sandwiched between the two men, he dug his hands in his pockets and took out the little money he had with him and offered it without question.

The dwarf snatched his money from his hand and began counting. He seemed surprised by the sheer amount but didn't comment further.

The dwarf then nodded to the troll (yes, he was that size) and the two were walking away.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief; only it was too soon. Just when he thought he was in the safe, the dwarf turned around and socked him hard in his gut. Harry doubled over in pain and fell to his knees and the troll kicked him on his back, landing him on the ground in a pained heap. Harry groaned as the two disproportionately sized men kicked him, and then, laughing, walked away.

He wasn't sure how long he remained lying there, but he knew it had been some time. He could feel the unsteady rise and fall of his chest. When he felt the pain recede or at least become bearable, he tentatively felt his body with his hands gently. There seemed to be a few bumps and more than a few bruises, but thankfully, nothing was broken.

Nervousness of having a repeat performance of what just happened to him rising, Harry unsteadily got to his feet and shakily made his way back to the inn. As he approached the place, there were more people around him and for some reason that made him feel a lot safer. The Inn he was staying at was nothing special to look at. It was the usual, if a bit on the shady side. An old, but still well maintained, sign was propped up above the front entrance that announced its name, something he couldn't pronounce. The inside lobby wasn't posh by any stretch of the imagination, but it was decent and the patrons, though not bursting with their optimism and honesty, didn't seem too bad either.

It was thus a bruised and battered Harry Potter that made it back to his room to figuratively lick his wounds for the night.

As he lay in his bed, afraid to move in fear of exacerbating his wounds, Harry came to a running conclusion: it was all well and good to believe that he could go Muggle, but it was quite another to actually do so.

Harry wiggled in his tiny bed and nearly cried out in pain, when he felt himself turning a bit too sharply and paining his side on a particularly nasty bruise.

As he squinted his eyes and counted to ten, he couldn't help but remember Madame Promfrey. She probably would've fixed his wounds without breaking a sweat. He wouldn't even be in pain right

now and would have been asleep with only Voldemort's nighttimes terrors to worry about.

He couldn't go Muggle, not due to lack of trying, but because he wasn't one. He could try and pretend, but that's what it would always be - a fib, nothing more. He would always stay what he was on the inside no matter how much he denied it, and what he was, was a Wizard.

As Harry emerged in the magical street of Romania, he smiled to himself slightly; he loved the sight of it. It was eerily similar to Diagon Alley, but with many subtle differences, culminating into a completely different culture and way of magic. The witches and wizards of Romania also wore robes, but they were of an older fashion, they too practiced magic, but in a subtler way. Romania was a magical land utterly immersed in the study of artistic magic and understanding the nuances of magical energy.

Harry always wondered how magical paintings were made, and now he knew. They were generally commissioned to be made by Eastern European magicals, those whose primary focus of study has been Transfiguration, Enchantment and Ritualism since two millennia. It was really fascinating what you could learn about a place if you just sat down and read *A History of Magic*.

Harry walked onwards in the direction of his destination. On the way, he passed by one of the only two apothecary's and potion shops in the entire magical district: Stefan's.

He knew that shop because he owed a lot to the Russian potions master.

Harry carefully tapped the hindquarters of a statue of the horse being ridden by Ceaușescu, the deceased Romanian President who was killed in a revolution. Of course what is not very well known was that Ceaușescu was a wizard, who had studied at Durmstrang alongside Grindelwald. He also believed in the same Muggle-hating policies, as many purebloods do, so when push came to shove, his public had overthrown him.

However, the contributions that Ceaușescu made to magical Romania had left him as something of a martyr in their culture. He created the first magical street of Romania and hid it behind his

statues. Unfortunately, most of these entrances had to be remapped because all of his statues were decimated shortly after, yet Harry was lucky that this one had survived and served as a memorial of sorts.

Entering the street, Harry immediately started exploring the vicinity. His first order of business was to find a Gringotts Bank (or whatever the equivalent was) to exchange some Galleons into Romanian lei (after all, he had been robbed). He squinted his eyes in pain as his body was still tender from some of the kicks and bruises sustained from the night before.

On his way to the Bank, which he saw was on the other side of the community, he came across a small potion's shop, the only he had spotted up until now.

Stefan's was tiny and looked run-of-the-mill. The place was old with its slightly dusty signboard and creaking door but it still was well maintained.

Harry entered to see a very clean and scrubbed apothecary with a single, old man working behind the counter. He wasn't really sure what had drawn him to go inside the store, but his instincts were screaming at him to look inside. Indeed the store was a great find.

Looking at the display in the window alone Harry saw several potions that he had never seen in the Apothecary's at Diagon Alley. There was a potion to make your blood thicker, and more viscid. Harry figured that most rituals needed blood in their essential make-up and such a potion would be very useful. There was another potion called a wit-sharpening potion that gave the drinker the ability to concentrate and see details more effectively, which could be useful for any number of situations.

Looking around at the various potions vials in the shop itself had Harry quite intrigued. A lot of it was standard potion-making ingredients and some ready-made everyday use potions, but there were others like the blood thickening potion that seemed odd to Harry, some even out-of-place. But then again, Harry didn't recognize more than half of the potions there as the signs were in Romanian and whatever he understood was pure conjecture using his limited potion skills rather than anything else.

He heard some unintelligible words being directed towards him. Harry turned to face the old man with a confused smile, "I don't speak Romanian, sorry."

The man looked puzzled for a second but then nodded, "It has been long time from ven I spoke English."

Harry's jaw dropped and then he broke out into a large smile, "Really, you speak English! Thank Merlin!"

The old man smiled at his enthusiasm but just nodded in response, "I did uchenichestvo in America after parents taught me."

Harry was thrown by his last comment, "Um, what's a ucheni... uh that."

The man seemed uncomfortable. "Uchenichestvo, hard to explain, it is studying under elder of subject, for me potions. It is vat ve say in Russia."

It clicked in Harry's head as another thing he had read in A History of Magic, "An apprenticeship, then?"

The man smiled when Harry said that, "You speak not Romanian?"

Harry shook his head.

The man whooped. He turned around; leaving an even more confused Harry in his wake and began searching in his stores for something. A few minutes of hemming and hawing later, he pulled out an old vial which had something written on it in Romanian.

"This is potion to learn language. Drink and listen to people, in one day you vill learn."

That he did.

Harry smiled as he passed by Stefan's and went on to his final destination. The translation potion, as he had learnt its name to be when he went back to thank Stefan profusely, was meant to learn the language of a place immediately. Stefan had been most helpful in that regard and now Harry was much more comfortable running around the city and making himself comfortable.

Yet, Harry would have to agree that the one person who had helped Harry out the most had appeared seemingly out of the blue: Amanta Schimba cel Cumplit.

It had now been two days since Harry had discovered Magical Romania and he couldn't have been happier. No one seemed to recognize him because his black hair was common enough and his green eyes were nothing more than pretty. As far as his scar was concerned, it was permanently wrapped under a bandage. If any one were to ask, it was due to an accident (which was true enough). Especially now that he spoke their language, he was virtually one of the crowd. It was what he had desired all his life.

Yet he had new problems to face. Although he was part of the magical world, he couldn't continue learning. At first he thought about going into the local bookstore and buying as many books as he could, only to realize that although he could understand the language, he still couldn't write or read it - he was essentially illiterate. He then considered going back and studying the books he already had; brushing up on his abilities. That's when problem number two emerged - he still couldn't practice magic as he was under-age. He also didn't know what the laws for under-age magic users were in Romania, and the last thing he needed was to garner attention to himself. He was trapped, surrounded by magic but unable to use it.

The only option he had was to study potions, and Harry had a deep-seated hatred for that subject. If he turned up completely without options at the end of the week, however, he would ask for Stefan's help and start learning potions.

Harry spent most of his days trying to find anything in English in the entire area, but to his intense disappointment found that the diplomatic crisis of the 1700s had precipitated to the point that the government banned any English texts.

What to do?

On this particular day, Harry was lurking around one of the seedier parts of the Romanian Magical district (their version of Knockturn Alley) to find something, anything to help him, when it happened.

"Back off!" Came an angry grunt from around the corner.

Harry immediately pulled out his wand. Knowing he couldn't use it didn't mean he couldn't threaten to use it.

Harry surreptitiously turned the corner and pulled out the Invisibility Cloak from his pocket and hid himself under it.

Walking slowly, so as not to make a noise, he saw what the commotion was about.

Off to the side, near a deserted square, were five men surrounding a tiny, but annoyed-looking, middle-aged woman.

"Hand over the money, lady," said the ruffian that seemed to be the leader of the troupe, with his wand-tip burning at the woman's neck.

The woman flashed her eyes towards the man and Harry had his first good look at her. She seemed old, but not as old as he had originally anticipated. Her hair was black and straight, tied into a bun, her face was lined with some wrinkles, and she was tiny - about half Dumbledore's height, and a bit plump. Yet her small stature seemed insignificant in comparison with the angry expression on her face as she glowered at the man who had manhandled her.

The third man behind the leader held two wands and Harry knew that they had disarmed her, otherwise, she seemed ferocious enough to take care of herself, because despite the situation she was in, she didn't seem scared - just angry; really, really, angry.

"I will never sully myself by stooping to your orders, child, now unhand me and I will show you mercy," she intoned, a sharp edge to her tone.

The gruff backhanded her across her face and Harry was sure he saw blood spout from the side of her lip.

Hermione did always say he had a 'saving people thing'.

Without thinking twice, Harry, still invisible, rushed forward and ran headfirst into the man, knocking him off balance. The other four men looked around, startled, and pointed their wands in formation, in four

different directions. The leader stumbled but turned around and narrowed his eyes, searching for his assailant. Harry had wisely chosen to back off and wait till he had another moment to attack.

When the four men pointing their wands seemed to relax, Harry picked up a rock and flung it at the man holding the old lady's wand. He then fled his original vantage point and moved to the opposite side.

The man yelled in pain as the rock's aim held true and hit his head, causing him to drop both wands and hold his head to ease the pain. The other three men immediately began a steady volley of spell-fire in the direction of the attack. Harry, at the other side of the street, could hardly suppress his laughter.

Creeping slowly, Harry walked forward and crouched beside the man holding his head, eyes still closed. Carefully, Harry picked up the man's and the old lady's wand and hid them under his Cloak. He then turned around and walked towards the old lady.

"My wand is gone!" the man yelled suddenly, distracting the others.

The leader growled, "Whoever you are, reveal yourself, or I'll kill her!" He said, pressing his wand-tip into the lady's side.

Harry stood helpless as he eyed the situation. What to do now?

The man was clearly losing his patience. He muttered a weak severing charm and the old lady cried in pain as her side ripped open and blood dripped out. She clamped a hand on her wound and promptly slapped the man across the face with the other hand.

The leader pushed her to the ground and positioned his wand above her head.

"Reveal yourself! I won't ask again!"

Harry crept forward; there was only so much he could do. That's when an idea struck him. It was so ridiculous and simplistic that he just had to try it.

"FOOLS!" Harry intoned in a deep, baritone voice.

He then rushed to the other side as spell-fire impacted his previous spot.

"YOU DARE TO ATTACK CEAUSESCU'S GHOST! I OUGHT TO HANG YOU FOR YOUR BETRAYAL!" He proclaimed in a voice as majestic as he could manage.

Two of the four wizards didn't dare raise their wands, their eyes wide in fear. The remaining two, including the leader, seemed shocked, but attacked nonetheless.

Yet again, Harry moved just in the nick of time. When positioned in a new location, he calmed his breathing and tried one last time, while inching his way towards the old lady who was on the ground sporting a bemused expression.

"LEAVE, CHILDREN, LEST I SUMMON THE SPECTRAL ROYAL GUARD AND TORMENT YOUR SOULS FOR ALL ETERNITY!"

No spell-fire accompanied this last message, and he was close enough to the woman. He bent down, hoping to pass on her wand without startling her, but to his intense surprise, she grasped her wand firmly before it was even completely out of his Cloak. She pulled it out and hid it under her robes.

The five men seemed very uncertain. The two who initially hesitated and the one who was injured seemed cowered enough.

"Maybe we should comply, Vlad?" one said.

The leader seemed torn and his moment of indecision was all that was necessary.

The old lady stood up, and, in a flourish, disarmed him. She grasped his wand in her hand and used a silent blasting hex to push the thug away. While the other three (the fourth still not in possession of his wand) attacked her on pure instinct. She smiled with apparent expectation. The leader was knocked out on a piece of rubble a distance away, and the remaining three, no matter what they threw at her, were surprised by the level of her shield's defence.

What they could not see as they were so busy keep a constant stream of attack up, was that the way the woman was silently

summoning random pieces of rubble and rock from the ground and transfiguring them into the form of shield. Every time their spells seemed to cause a crack and break the shield, five times more rock was summoned and transfigured.

In one minute flat, the woman had presented a veritable barrage of transfigured shielding in front of her. What she was using as a shield was a type of metal that had an odd sheen to it, but Harry had no idea what it was.

The woman then waved her wand and whispered an incantation that Harry barely caught.

From around her, various pieces of transfigured metal broke from the shield and were transformed back into rubble. These pieces were clamped together into three entities and formed wolves - realistic animate wolves! Perhaps the most remarkable part of it all was that she had achieved this feat of transfiguration in less than a minute and her assailants had no idea what she was doing.

With a flourish of her wand, she unleashed the wolves that attacked the three wand-wielders with unbridled ferocity. What followed was, put lightly, a massacre. Although the wolves didn't kill the wizards, they did appoint grievous physical harm. They bit and chewed and pulled apart their skin as the men screamed, their spells and hexes dodged expertly.

Five minutes later, all of the men were bound and unconscious, (bound by a silent Incarcerous, but unconscious by very Muggle means). She cast a whispered healing charm on herself and eased the wound caused by the leader's severing charm. When satisfied with her healing wandwork, the witch levitated the thugs with a silent Mobilicorpus (or at least, Harry assumed so) and began walking away from the street, her wolves prowling around her in a feral, protective manner. She stopped suddenly and turned to Harry, her eyes boring into his and it was as though the Invisibility Cloak was not there at all.

"You may come out now," she said in a deep, aged voice.

The memory of the massacre (he didn't think it was fair to call it a battle) still fresh in his mind, and mindful of the fact that his

Invisibility Cloak seemed unable to fool her, Harry revealed himself with a guarded expression on his face.

"Thank you, young man. Your imminent assistance is much appreciated." She said, nodding regally. "Is there anything I can do to return the favour?"

Harry's initial request was to leave him unharmed and he'd be eternally grateful. But squashing his inner coward, he asked for the one thing he knew he needed more than anything else.

"Can you teach me? I want to learn to fight like that." Harry was quite sure that his determination sounded wavered and his voice was unusually high, but it was entirely involuntary. After seeing this woman duel, anyone would be intimidated.

She regarded him with keen, unflinching eyes, as if assessing his worth and value. After an indeterminable passage of time, during which Harry was consciously trying to stop his legs from shaking, she gave a small, barely perceptible nod.

"I will teach you the Magical Arts of Transfiguration and Enchantment, and it will be difficult. It shall be your responsibility to remain worthy."

Harry nodded, barely believing that he managed to get a chance like this.

"What should I call you?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"Amanta Cumplit, Amanta Schimba cel Cumplit," she said clearly. "And you are?"

Harry bit his lip. For some reason, lying to this woman didn't seem like a viable option.

"Harry Potter."

Her eyes widened for a mere second and if Harry hadn't been specifically looking for a reaction he would've missed it, but it was gone as soon as it came. She nodded and walked off with her entourage levitating behind her.

"Well, what are you waiting for, Harry?" she called without turning. When Harry still hadn't moved; "we have a lot of work to do if I am to teach you."

He followed her quickly as she was still waiting for him, when he caught up, she held out her hand, "Pass me your wand."

Harry was hesitant but her encouraging nod urged him on and he reluctantly placed his wand in her hand.

She extricated her own wand, waved it in some complicated patterns and muttered a few incantations under her breath. They were in an old Slavic language that Harry could not understand. She returned his wand.

"You are now officially my student, Harry," she said simply.

Harry stood there dumbly and then followed her unquestioningly when she started walking. He stared, amazed, at his wand and a small smile perked his lips. He had magic in his life again.

Harry smiled to himself at the memory of that first encounter. Indeed, learning from Amanta Cumplit had been the best thing to happen to him. She was a Mistress of Transfiguration and Enchantment, as he had come to learn. She also had very high standards. It had barely been four days since he had started training with her and she had already deemed his skills "disgraceful." Harry frowned at the memory of the way she had reprimanded him in her home and told him that his ability was pitiful at best.

As he had come to learn the hard way, Enchantment was simply the more the advanced form of Charms, but he was to never, never equate the two as one in front of Amanta.

"Saying that that deplorable off-shoot of the mighty art of Enchantment is actually the basis of my art is the greatest insult you could hurl at an artist. Enchantment is a subtle craft, not mindless waving of wands to a specific spell for a standardized result. The difference between the two is like staring at Ceausescu's Palace and staring at an image of it - similar at a glance, but vastly contrasting in magnitude."

True enough, Enchantment was much harder than Charms. Charms was about learning a spell and wand-motion and following through with it, Enchantment was about reducing the spellwork and making it all about the spell - achieving the same result (if not a more powerful one) with reduced, concentrated effort.

He began the first day of his lessons sitting in front of a quill, trying to make it fly without the swish-and-flick of his wand. He held it steady and straight and concentrated and concentrated. After hours of uninterrupted work with only the occasional comment or instruction from the Amanta, Harry could levitate his feather with moving his wand at all, after which he was allowed to stop.

This, as he learned somewhat to his horror, was only the beginning.

It was after this display of control over the spell, the Amanta asked Harry to make the quill fly, he flourished his wand and made the quill zoom across the room and do cartwheels, he rolled his wand with practiced ease, then tap-dance, once again he swished his wand from side-to-side as Professor Flitwick had instructed. She then asked him to all that without moving his wand at all.

And so it went.

Amanta had said a time would come when it would make sense, when the intricate workings that differentiated Enchantment as an Art from Enchantment the Science would "click" in his head, but until then, he had to practice, he had to learn and he had to do it perfectly if he ever wanted to move on to Transfiguration.

He finally reached his destination after his walk. It was a small home, modest by all accounts but reasonably well maintained. There was one room, a kitchen area, and a main hall, which substituted as his training room whenever he was there. Today he had to continue with his work on the summoning charm till he could summon things by will rather than by incantation and wand movement.

He entered her home and said the ritual greeting.

"Good morning, Amanta."

"Good morning, Harry."

Today, for some reason, was different. Today, instead of setting Harry to practice the discussed charm as they had been doing for days on end, she had him come with her to the back garden.

The garden was a part of her house that he had never really seen before. It was vast and rather beautiful, filled with sweet-smelling flowers and bushes. Of course it didn't hold a candle to the Hogwarts greenhouses, but it was still easily appreciable (the noticeable lack of flesh-eating plants was a welcome change).

"Today, Harry, I want you to work in the garden; plough the seeds for some new plants, water the others, and add some manure, which is done to each plant individually," she said, fondly gazing at her garden.

She walked to one side where a watering can and a few bags of manure and seeds were kept. "I want you to plant one seed of this specific rosebush every three meters from the one before along the entire stretch of land ten meters up and three meters wide, beginning at the base of the oak," she said, pointing to the towering oak tree to one side, "till the end of the sunflowers," she said, pointing to the last row of sunflowers.

"I need you to plant ten of these seeds. But each seed has to be planted with an exact fifteen-minute gap. If you miss the mark, you will have to start again," she continued. Harry had already taken out a quill and parchment to jot down these instructions - there was no way he was going to remember them otherwise.

"In the fifteen minute wait between seed-planting, I want you to water all the flowers individually. Remember that this is concentrated holy water; so only use ten millimetres per flower, and nothing more, nothing less. Remember that if you start watering a bush, you have to finish watering the entire bush. The same principle abides with all the flowers. You cannot leave it left half-completed. The spell on the holy water will be blurred and rendered useless if you do. When the watering is done successfully, the plant is engulfed in a bluish glow so you know you can move on." She gestured to the watering can and the measuring cup beside it. "Lastly, when all the watering and planting is done, I want you to fertilize the five fig trees and my pride and joy, the oak, with sufficient fertilizer. One quarter bag, and a little more if you think it is necessary."

"No magic is to be used in garden. The successful growth of plants requires a human touch, so keep that wand away at all times." With that, she walked back to her house.

With a swift but soft click the garden door was closed and Harry was left facing a most tedious and laborious task.

Wonderful.

Harry planted his first seed near the base of the oak. Once planted, he looked at the small clock to the side and calculated when its fifteen minutes would end. He then took the watering can and set to work on the magnolias. Measuring out ten millilitres of water, he poured it at the base of the first flower. This process continued until he was halfway through the first bush - who knew there were so many flowers? It certainly didn't appear so at first glance. When he was more than halfway through with the bush, he looked to check the clock and saw that he had only three minutes until the fifteen-minute mark was up. Speeding up his efforts, Harry tried to get through the remaining magnolias at break-neck speed, only to realize that he was not hitting the exact ten-millimetre mark on the measuring can. With the last flower hastily watered, Harry ran back to plant the next seed. He was barely through digging another mound for the second seed when he noticed that he was two minutes too late.

"Bloody hell!" He cursed loudly.

He then got up, turned around and dug out the first seed. Keeping his eyes on the clock, he replanted it and then headed out to continue watering the second bush. Deciding to be faster rather than careful his time, Harry tried getting through the entire bush and did so with three minutes to spare. With that time in hand, he returned and waited beside the dug up mound to plant the second seed in. He fell into a pattern and was now fast approaching the fifth seed at the end of one side of the trail.

Harry reached the end of the sunflowers and realized that there was no way to fit a fifth seed and still keep a three-metre distance. After some rather difficult mental math, he realized that it was mathematically impossible in a ten-metre strip to have a set of five

seeds three metres apart. It couldn't work out. But what should he do now?

Seeing that he only had a minute to figure something out, lest he start the entire process over again, Harry decided that there was nothing he could but break the rules. He moved up two meters beyond the end of the sunflowers' trail and dug in a mound and planted the fifth seed.

He wasn't aware how long he worked in his way, but he was aware that it had been a long while. Previously he was used a marked scale in the garden to measure an exact three metre width and length before plantation. He also used the watering cup to measure an exact ten millimetres each time. This finished; he picked up the manure bags. He distantly remembered that he had to use a quarter of the bag per tree, but couldn't bring himself to measure anything. He was too frustrated at this point. Using his hands and a basic approximation, he put manure down at all the fig trees and the precious oak tree.

Harry sat at the base of the oak tree and overlooked the entire garden. It was beautiful in the afternoon sun, each bush of flowers glowing an ethereal blue with the effects of holy water. In front of his eyes, he saw the beginning of the growth of the rosebushes he had just planted. Magic can do wonderful things when it comes to Herbology.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

Harry jumped a meter in the air and whirled around with his wand pointed at the source of the voice. It was the Amanta. He breathed deeply and lowered his wand upon recognizing her. She had only an amused expression on her face.

"You can be very easily excited, young man," she said, only half-joking.

Harry just shrugged and turned to look back at his hard-day's labor.

"Did you follow my instructions properly?" She asked quietly.

"Um..." Well, what should he say? No I got tired and threw caution to the winds and just did it anyway? "...somewhat."

The Amanta chuckled in her deep voice, "Ah, Harry, of course you didn't, I can see it obviously."

Harry turned around with his eyes lowered, "I'm sorry, I should have tried harder."

"Nonsense," she said casually, "Why, if you had succeeded, I would have been even more at a loss on how to train you. Tell me, did you realize how I knew you failed to follow my instructions?"

Harry looked back at the garden and then at her and just quirked his eyebrows in genuine curiosity. "Not really."

She chuckled again and sat down beside him. "Look at the rosebushes, Harry, are they all growing at the same, steady rate?"

Harry did as he was told but already knew the answer: they weren't growing at the same, steady rate, because up until the fifth seed he was actually keeping to the fifteen-minute warning. When he got impatient with the sixth seed, he planted it in the fourteenth minute and the last four were similarly skewered. That could be seen evidently, as, instead of growing in uniform bursts, as the roses were sprouting on the first five bushes simultaneously, whereas on the latter five, they were following a completely different tune and pattern, sprouting erratically.

Harry nodded sheepishly to the Amanta.

"What about the flowers you watered, Harry? Do you notice anything different about the bushes' glows?"

Harry looked towards the bushes and, lo and behold, she was right again. Each bush was glowing blue, but the intensity of the glow was varied. Where one was literally shining, the others were slightly lit and some others were in between. It was like a lighting show. Harry also knew why this had happened. His policy of watering with an exact ten-millimetre sprinkle was thrown out the window when he reached the fourth bush, and he merely began an approximated sprinkle after that.

Again, Harry nodded sheepishly to Amanta.

"What about the fig trees? Look at the leaves and colour of the bark."

Indeed, while two trees had a dark, rich bark and bright green leaves, two others had a lightened brown with shimmering leaves, and the last one had an almost-black bark and dark, stark green leaves that could be spotted from a far distance. His approximations with the magical manure were at the root of this.

"I'm sorry, Amanta, I should have been more careful," he intoned in sadness. And to think he was proud of his work.

"But Harry," she said calmly. "If everything was done as perfectly as I had instructed, do you agree that it would have been beautiful?"

Harry creased his brows in consternation but simply nodded, the picture in his head of the uniformed glow of the flowers and the simultaneous bursts of roses on the bushes and the similarly glowing trees was definitely alluring.

"Look back to what you did, Harry," she said brightly and Harry complied, looking at the garden he had worked on. "Is it still not beautiful?"

Harry sighed, "It is beautiful, Amanta."

"That it is, Harry." She said, then got up and went into the house, leaving Harry to his musings.

The garden is beautiful and it stays beautiful no matter how he measured out the ingredients. It wasn't impeccably done, but the imperfection had luster to it that Harry couldn't place.

It was beautiful anyway.

Beautiful anyway...

Beautiful anyway...!

Harry stood up, his eyes wide in understanding. He turned around and ran into the house, calling the Amanta at the top of his voice.

He screeched to a halt in the main hall, where she stood with a quill.

"Yes, Harry?" She asked with a wide smile.

"Magic is beautiful anyway, it doesn't matter how perfectly we try to shape it or word it - we are imperfect, but the magic perfects everything for us, and it's beautiful as long as we try to make it so," he said in a rush, everything appearing so much clearer to him now.

"What about the Arts?" she asked with mock-confusion.

Harry considered for a second and the answer came to him. "Imperfection creates originality; everyone can produce the same result, but few can do so with the same mistakes. Enchantment is an Art because the spellwork is complicated enough to not be standardized or perfect, but the mistakes are varying enough to allow individual spell-casters to create mistakes of their own and mark their spells differently."

Amanta clapped her hands and then raised them above her head and clamped them in fists, doing a small dance in a quick rotation. "Exactly, Harry! Congratulations! You've just discovered for yourself the Universal Law of the Magical Arts!"

Harry smiled and considered copying Amanta's dance. "I understand it now!"

After a few peals of laughter, the Amanta led him to the sitting area and handed him a cup of tea, which he gratefully accepted.

"What now, Amanta?" he asked excitedly.

She took a long sip of her tea and then spoke. "You just realized the difference between Enchantment and Charms. Now you will learn how to do Enchantment."

Harry was thrilled but it began to melt away in the face of the fierce expression the Amanta was sporting.

"Oh, child, realize one thing. What you've been doing until now was introductory, and the full extent of your training begins now."

Harry gulped. Suddenly he didn't seem all that thrilled anymore.

Author Notes:

1. The passage from A History of Magic is an AU idea.
2. The Russian accent was written after reading stuff online so don't blame me if I got it wrong.
3. Stefan is a common Russian name.
4. Uchenichestvo is Apprenticeship in Russian.
5. The Translation Potion is an AU idea.
6. Nicolae Ceaușescu (26 January 1918 – 25 December 1989) was a Romanian politician who was the Secretary General of the Romanian Communist Party from 1965 to 1989, President of the Council of State from 1967, and President of Romania from 1974 to 1989.

Ceaușescu's second decade was characterized by an increasingly erratic personality cult, nationalism and a deterioration in foreign relations with the Western powers as well as the Soviet Union. Ceaușescu's government was overthrown in a December 1989 revolution, and he and his wife were executed following a televised and hastily organized two-hour court session. One of the executioners later said: "it wasn't a trial, it was a political assassination in the middle of a revolution."

7. Vlad is a common Romanian name.
8. Amanta Schimba cel Cumplit is a collection of Romanian translations. Amanta is Mistress, Schimba is Change, cel Cumplit is an ancestral, royal Romanian last name meaning ferocious.
9. The Universal Law of Magical Arts is an AU idea.

"Luckykas" concens:

- a) Why did Harry readily accept a potion from a stranger?

Ans. Harry has a tendency to trust first and ask questions later. He liked Stefan and he always goes with his instincts whether good or bad. This led to Sirius' death in OoTP and his extreme suspicion of Draco in HBP. He trusts his gut which gave an 'okay' to the Potions' Master. Maybe he is wrong, maybe not.

b) What was the Amanta doing in the 'seedier' parts of Magical Romania?

Ans. That will be revealed in due time.

c) Was it a set-up to get an apprentice?

Ans. No, Harry's surprise entry was a shock to her and so was her subsequent acceptance of him as her pupil.

d) What is Harry paying for his tutelage?

Ans. There is a history of the Romanian teachers (that will extend to include most Eastern European Magical Artists) and the way they interact and teach their pupils. They hold themselves to a standard and that is why she accepted Harry as a student. Will be explained in detail by Chapter 3 or 4. (its a minor thing, so not given much importance). So that's the First chapter, any all feedback is appreciated.

If you notice any grammatical errors and such, let me know and I'll fix them because my Betas haven't gotten back to me yet. Just write the error in a review or PM me.

Drop a REVIEW and make my day.

Thanks for reading,

~ Gatonio.

CHAPTER TWO

DREAM ON

Half my life is in books' written pages

Lose and learn from fools and from sages

You know its true

All the things come back to you

Dream on, dream on, dream on,

Dream it till the dream comes true,

Dream on, dream on, dream on

Dream it till your dreams come through.

Dream On ~ Aerosmith.

He wrung his hands as he thought of his arguments. Taking a deep breath, he seated himself and considered his entire case one last time. He knew the entire speech by heart, but it never hurt to be prepared. That was why everyone counted on him to do what needed to be done and today, today he needed to be the perfect politician. On the bright side, he still had three more hours to sufficiently bring himself into a mental condition whereby he would fulfil his responsibility to the best of his ability.

He was sitting by the side as he tried to calm his breathing. It was at times like this he wished Fawkes was present. The phoenix could always soothe his aging nerves no matter how dire the situation.

A paper plane soared into the waiting room and stood at attention in front of his crooked nose. Extending a wrinkled hand, he gingerly opened it and began to read its contents.

Albus

The time of the Hearing has been rescheduled down in the Chambers to be started in five minutes! You need to get there before Fudge rules him as guilty by absence.

Arthur.

Dumbledore sighed tiredly. He had come to grow very tired of Cornelius' little games. There was only so much he could handle and he was becoming far too old for these petty political squabbles.

Gathering his strength, he stood up to his full height and left the waiting room. Fortunately, he had anticipated a bump of this sort along the way and made his plans in the advent of them occurring. Taking long strides he made his way to the Ministry elevator. Entering he tried to avert his eyes from catching any of the awed yet suspicious glances the others shot in his direction the minute the elevator opened to his floor and he got in. The fact that all conversation had immediately ceased the minute he entered was proof enough of what they were discussing.

The minutes passed by agonizingly slowly, but finally, finally, the elevator stopped at Level Nine and Dumbledore made his exit and walked to the end of the Chamber. Once at the entrance he saw Arthur Weasley standing there, wringing his hands like he always did when nervous or tense (or in this case, both).

As soon as Arthur's eyes fell on him, they lit up with hope and a sense of peace, that look was why Albus worked as hard as he did to do what was right, because witches and wizards depended on him to do what needed to be done. Steeling himself and bringing his mock-cheer to the forefront, he greeted Arthur as politely as one would expect a Headmaster to when meeting an ex-student.

"Mr. Weasley, it is good that you are here, I believe the court is in session already." Dumbledore said calmly.

Realizing where they were and that he was wearing his emotions on his sleeve, Arthur took a deep breath and bravely put on a disengaged façade, "Ah Headmaster, glad you're here, yes they rescheduled, I'm relieved you got the message of the change in time."

Dumbledore nodded understandingly. One would wonder why they behaved so formally despite being alone. Well, it's an old saying that 'the walls have ears'. What most muggles didn't know when saying that is that in the Magical World that isn't a mere saying, but in fact a common occurrence.

Dumbledore stood in front of the door and waited with a half-smile on his face that was only partially forced seeing Arthur squirm in discomfort.

"Won't you be going in Professor?" He finally blurted.

"Ah Mr. Weasley," Dumbledore said with a touch of amusement, "politicians are simply performers of a different kind, but performers all the same. A flair for drama makes all the difference."

He stopped and heard Fudge say, "On trial, Harry James Potter, not present, Defence—"

"Now if you would excuse me Arthur," Dumbledore said with a smile as he opened the heavy double doors of the Lower Chamber for criminal trials and walked in just as Fudge was about to say 'not present', "Defence for the Witness," he intoned in a loud, but firm voice, "Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbeldore"

A grand entrance has its own charm after all.

All eyes were on him as he entered in his sunny orange robes with little embroidered fairies moving in rotations around his midsection.

"Ah Albus," Fudge said a bit taken aback, "I'm glad you got the owl that the time and place of the hearing had been changed."

Dumbledore chuckled internally, 'still such a child Cornelius', "I must have missed it Minister, but by a happy coincidence I arrived at the Ministry three hours early."

Fudge looked ruffled as some Chamber members stifled their laughs, the winner in the first match of wills was obvious.

"Well, um... That's good." He said lamely.

"Indeed Minister." Dumbledore answered jovially as he pulled out his wand and with a completely unnecessary flourish caused a very comfortable-looking chintz armchair to materialize in the middle of the courtroom and took a seat, regarding the gathered assembly with a keen but twinkling eye.

"Well," Fudge said arranging his papers, "It seems the defendant, Mr. Potter, has seen fit not to grace us with his presence today."

"I would imagine that having changed the place and time of the Hearing an exact half-hour before it was to begin would lead to organizational hazards. Not everyone enjoys happy coincidences such as myself of course. Perhaps if we wait for him to arrive..." Dumbledore answered lightly.

"The Wizengamot waits for none Dumbledore," Fudge said with as much dignity as he could muster, "Mr. Potter had been sent a missive regarding the possibility of such an occurrence and should have been prepared for the likely outcome if he wasn't."

Fudge then turned to the gathered assembly and Dumbledore knew what was coming next, it was the patented voice-of-reason speech that Fudge prepared for all occasions.

"As the members of the Wizengamot can see, Mr. Potter displays a worrying level of nonchalance with regards to authority. By being absent for his trial he is showing the level of his disregard. Too long have we allowed the Boy-Who-Lived to come and prance around like he owns the Wizarding World and will we continue to bend to his will? I'm afraid some are not gifted with the ability to handle the fame given to them; Mr. Potter is an unfortunate example of this. The boy needs help and is a danger to himself and those around him. His use of magic, after having been told not to in the past, among muggles breaches one of our most ancient and sanctimonious laws of the Statute of Secrecy. He needs to be expelled from Hogwarts and have his wand snapped for the good of the community, to curb his incessant lying and to prevent him from harming others in the future. I call for the enactment of the 'Guilt by Omission' clause due to his serious negligence and further disrespect to our sacred Chambers by his absence today."

His speech completed, Fudge sat down with his back turned from the Assembly.

A normal wizard against Fudge would be worried at this point, but Dumbledore was thankfully not a normal wizard. All he felt was a grin threatening to breakout as he thought 'Touché'.

When the Chamber had settled down after that momentarily rousing speech, Dumbledore stood up and took two imposing strides forwards; he looked at the entire Assembly with a keen eye and a stern expression, speaking nay a word. The members began squirming under his gaze in discomfort but he didn't waver. When it looked like Fudge was about to interrupt he abruptly turned to Madame Bones.

"Madame Bones," he said calling her attention and bringing her into the focus of the entire Wizengamot, "Would you kindly read out Clause XXXXIII under the Wizengamot Chambers protocol?"

The Madame looked at him with a raised monocle but complied, she sifted through her papers and pulled out the relevant parchment. On finding the right clause she read out verbatim what was written.

"Under the Protocol of Wizengamot Trial Procedures published and ascertained by the Wizengamot in 1982, Ministry of Magic:

Clause XXXXIII states that all defendants are to be given notice of trial. Failure to be present after said notification was discharged will result in the immediate effectiveness of the 'Guilt by Omission' Clause and the defendant is to be apprehended by Aurors upon sight."

Cornelius smiled in satisfaction thinking he had won.

Dumbledore raised his palm and stalled his oncoming remark.

"Madame, would you kindly humour an Old Man further and read out the second addendum under said clause?" He continued with the same level of joviality.

Madame Bones sighed but complied nonetheless, "Second Addendum to Clause XXXXIII states that if the aforementioned notification is altered in any way, shape or form, the defendant is to be informed of said alteration at least twenty-four hours before the trial commences. If the twenty-four hour mark period is not complied

with then the 'Guilt by Omission' Clause is no longer within effect and the Trial must continue with or without the presence of the Defendant."

When she finished the addendum a small smile came to her lips and through her eyes, she conveyed her mirth to the aged Headmaster.

Dumbledore turned to Fudge and raised his hands, "I'm afraid Minister that under the eyes of our law it would be criminal to enact that Clause as the Madame so pointed out. Let us now commence with the Trial then, with or without Mr. Potter's presence."

Fudge looked like he had swallowed something bitter by nodded anyway. "Weatherby, kindly read out the charges."

Percy donned a serious and self-absorbed expression as he began reading the charges to the Assembly.

"Harry James Potter had received notification in the past from the Improper Use of Magic's Office under Madame Mafalda Hopkirk on the Third of August, 1992 for the usage of a Hover Charm in his home. But the offence was waived as a warning. However, on the Tenth of July, 1995, Mr. Potter was reported to have attempted to use a Patronus Charm in a park within his residential locality within Little Whinging, Surrey in the presence of a muggle. This breaches the Statute of Secrecy Clauses—"

"That's enough Weatherby," Fudge cut him off, "As you can see Honoured Members, Mr. Potter has used a Patronus Charm in front of a muggle within a muggle locality. His serious error in judgement has placed him in the situation he finds himself in today."

"Minister, if I may," Dumbledore interjected calmly, "What is the most grievous offence in this case: underage magic or performing said magic in front of a muggle?"

Fudge bristled but answered, "Certainly that he did it in front of a muggle—"

"Well then why wasn't an obliviation team sent across to address the issue? There is no record of one ever being sent there for fear of this muggle speaking out." Fudge was about to answer when Dumbledore raised his hands to the Assembly, "The answer is

simple members, it is because the muggle in question was Mr. Dudley Dursley, Harry's cousin. The two have grown up together and I can assure you that Mr. Dursley has been well aware of magic and the existence of our world since before Mr. Potter's attendance at Hogwarts began. The Statute of Secrecy was not breached at all as the specific Clause XXI, subclauses 1, 2 and 3 provide for such a situation. If the Assembly would like I'm sure Madame Bones would regale us with her angelic voice reading out the relevant clauses making Mr. Potter's actions completely legal."

Dumbledore regarded Fudge with a happy expression as Fudge's mood darkened; it was through clenched teeth that he spat out, "That won't be necessary Dumbledore. The matter still stands that whether the muggle knew about magic or not, Mr. Potter has not attained his majority and thus is not allowed to practice magic outside of Hogwarts' term time. That charge is clearly not negated."

Dumbledore sat down in his conjured armchair dramatically and rubbed his chin, "Indeed Minister, that is true, but," Here he sat back and looked on sagely, "There is a very clear law that we are all aware of, 'In cases of grave danger where the life of a wizard or witch comes under threat, the use of magic to protect himself and those around him is acceptable in the eyes of the law'."

Fudge smiled predatorily, "Yes Dumbledore, as true as that may be, there was no threat to Mr. Potter's life, he acted on his own volition."

Dumbledore smiled innocently, "I believe that that is where we come at an impasse Minister, by your leave, may I present my first witness Mrs. Arabella Figg."

Whispers broke out in the Assembly as Mrs. Figg entered from the Visitor's entrance and took a seat in the wooden chair with chains hanging off of the sides. She looked nervous and Dumbledore gave her a soothing smile, now the theatrics would really start.

"What sort of danger was he in then?" Fudge said noncommittally.

"A dementor attack." Dumbledore answered serenely.

"Dementors!" Fudge spluttered and then as if realization dawned upon him, "Of course, it had to be dementors, muggles can't see dementors after all. As interesting as I'm sure this well-rehearsed

story is, I think we all know that it is mere fiction." Fudge finished his little speech by addressing the Assembly and trying to get them to agree with his point of view.

"In the presence of a witness Cornelius, it is part of the Wizengamot's duty to accept the evidence, or would you prefer I pointed the relevant section of our laws?" Dumbledore asked serenely.

"Fine then," Fudge said with clenched teeth, "Mrs. Figg, kindly describe the attack."

"Well there were the two boys huddled under the dementors. It all became cold and empty, icy chills were forming everywhere and it was like all the happiness had drained out of my life leaving only misery. I relived the worst experience of my life as I remembered the death of my husband during the War." Although she said this calmly, her voice took on an emotional tenderness when mentioning her husband.

Dumbledore knew this would happen, hence he encouraged her to mention it; it would increase her creditability as a number of Chamber Members had lost loved ones to the War.

"We have no registered information of any other magical living in Little Whinging other than Mr. Potter." Fudge said triumphantly.

"Well, of course you wouldn't have me on your list, I'm a squib." Mrs. Figg answered matter-of-factly.

Fudge began turning puce, "A squib you say, could they even see dementors?"

"I assure you we can!" Mrs. Figg answered with a hint of anger in her tone.

"She described the effects of dementors perfectly well Minister and the reaction to them as well. In the light of dementors attacking, Mr. Potter's patronus attempt seems like a logical and legal defence." Madame Bones interjected from the side.

"I assure you it was more than an attempt Madame, Mr. Potter is rather gifted with defensive magic, he has been able to produce a

patronus, a corporeal patronus since the age of thirteen." Dumbledore said proudly amidst the many gasps of surprise in the gathered Assembly.

Good, now Harry's reputation has just skyrocketed in their opinion.

"The fact of the matter is that the more impressive his magic, the greater the offence. I'm sure none of you give in to this cock-and-bull story about dementors." Minister Fudge laughed towards the end.

"Ah, but the story is still true Cornelius." Dumbledore smiled and answered.

"Hem hem." Came a voice from the side, "I'm sorry Dumbledore, but dementors are creatures under Ministry control, are you suggesting that they went rogue and attacked Mr. Potter?" Came the sickly sweet, patronizing voice of Dolores Umbridge.

"I have no idea what those dementors were doing so far away from their island home Madame Undersecretary and I am sure the Ministry will undertake a full inquiry into their presence." He retorted and saw Umbridge glower in response.

"However, there could be another reason," Dumbledore strode forward and looked directly at Fudge, "Cornelius I implore you to see reason."

Fudge placed both hands, palm down on the table and inclined his head forwards, "HE'S NOT BACK! The Wizengamot may have to accept this evidence but laws can be changed, Dumbledore!"

"Clearly it has become a matter of full criminal trials for simple cases of underage magic." Dumbledore retorted dismissively.

More whispers broke out as he delivered the final blow and both Cornelius and he knew they he had won this round.

Dumbledore sighed in defeat, there would be no saving Cornelius when the time of reckoning came.

When Fudge composed himself, he sat back in his seat and pretended nothing had happened. A moment of silence passed and Madame Bones picked up the proceedings.

"In the matter of Harry James Potter, all those in favour of conviction, kindly raise your hands." She intoned in her booming voice. Several hands were raised including the Minister's and Madame Umbridge.

Dumbledore shook his head in worry; those two would be nothing but trouble in the upcoming months.

"All those who clear the accused of all charges?"

Madame Bones herself raised her hand and so did many others, the majority of the others.

Fudge banged the gavel and said in a neutral voice, "Cleared of all charges."

The Wizengamot members began shuffling out of their seats and Dumbledore turned to Mrs. Figg who despite her earlier nervousness was smiling happily. He helped her up from the uncomfortable witness bench and then with a swish of his wand vanished the armchair he had conjured. The two then exited from the visitor's entrance where Arthur was waiting for them.

Dumbledore smiled when he saw him and Arthur brightened considerably, "Well?" Arthur asked unable to contain his glee.

"Cleared of all charges." Dumbledore answered.

If Arthur were not in such a setting he would have whooped in delight. Instead he smiled widely and took his leave to inform the family of the good news.

Dumbledore helped Mrs. Figg to the public-access floo and then made his way back to Hogwarts through the apparition point. He apparated immediately to his office and took a seat behind the desk.

Taking a deep breath, Dumbledore steadied himself and concentrated on his upcoming tasks. He may have won this battle, but the bigger trouble still remained unsolved. It had been over a month since Harry's disappearance and they had no idea where he had gone. Its like he vanished into thin air.

Dumbledore dragged back his chair making an audible screeching noise as he approached his cupboard and looked at his little intricate machine monitoring Harry's health, it was working perfectly and felt lukewarm: Harry was perfectly fine.

Releasing a breath he had no idea he was holding Dumbledore retook his seat and contemplated the best course of action. Fawkes trilled from his perch and Dumbledore smiled at him.

"There is only so much I can do Fawkes, if he refuses to return, there is only so much for me to do." He answered in a sad voice.

Dumbledore opened his drawer and withdrew a letter, the very same letter that Harry had left him.

He had read it more than a million times, hoping to find some clue or inkling to his whereabouts that he wasn't aware of before, but nothing had come up. The letter was still frustratingly the same.

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

I hope that you can understand my motivations for doing what I've done. I wish to live my life in some semblance of order that I see fit and living constantly under watch and care is not what I intended for myself. Today Cedric has died, tomorrow who knows who it will end up being? Will it be Ron? Hermione? The Weasleys? Sirius? I can't stay on there happily knowing that I am putting them in danger. That is why I am leaving, to pursue a different life, a better life hopefully.

Maybe someday when I return, we can sit down and have a talk of the best possible actions and responses for this situation. But as of now, I wish you well and hope you can deal with this political disaster that has struck you because of my statements on Voldemort's return and your endorsement of them.

Yours,

Harry Potter.

Dumbledore sighed and placed the letter back in its place, there was nothing helpful in there whatsoever. It was just as frustratingly vague as when he had analyzed it the first million times.

The same question now plagued the Headmaster: Where are you Harry Potter?

"Dudley dear, its time to go, we're waiting." Petunia yelled in her shrill voice from the front seat of their car as Vernon was driving.

"Coming!" Came the response in a whiny voice.

Petunia groaned in dismay, her Dudders was still upset with her. Ever since she had hidden the Freak's parting letter from Dudley, he had been inordinately cool towards her. It was frustrating!

But now, now she could finally let go of all her worries and troubles. Now it was all going to be okay because the shadows of her family's past would no longer darken the lives of her husband and son. Vernon and she had come to an agreement a long time ago to leave as soon as the protection was gone when Harry turned seventeen, but seeing as it had been prematurely rescheduled to now, they were doing the best they could.

The House was empty, the movers had already taken their belongings to the Shipping Dock and they were happily headed to the airport towards Australia. In a little while, all would be well.

Dudley shuffled out of the house and quietly sat in the backseat of the car. Petunia looked at him with fondness but he looked away petulantly, his ire still very much present if unspoken.

"Alright then, to Gatwick!" Vernon said with mock cheer that neither his wife nor son reciprocated. With a huff at their apparent aloofness, he ignited the car and was off to a new life.

Petunia was perturbed by Dudley's continued dismissal of her; he was really offended that she tried to hide something from him. But didn't he understand, she had to! He had grown too fond of that freak of a nephew in the short time he was here this summer and association with that world would only lead to pain in the end.

She would know.

Dudley had never gotten the chance to meet his grandparents; the late Mr. and Mrs. Evans were victims of a Death Eater raid on their home. A raid conducted in the search of her sister. Petunia herself had been in the line of fire, she had nearly lost Vernon to severe burns when Death Eaters had destroyed their original home, an attack to send a message to her sister, once again. To add insult to injury, her sister had gone and gotten herself blown up and then her son, another freak, was dumped on her doorstep with a note stating that the danger would never end.

Petunia pursed her lips in distaste, that day, when she had taken him into her home, when she had made a willing sacrifice to protect her family from a threat that should never have loomed over them in the first place, she resolved to keep her son safe. She would do everything in her power to make sure her son never fell prey to the horrors of that world.

Yes, Petunia was happy they were leaving; it was all in Dudley's best interests after all.

Up ahead there was a prone form lying on the ground, from their distance they could barely make it out, but as they approached it, it became more distinctive. Vernon stopped the car and pulled to the side. Petunia placed a hand on his wrist to stop him; she had a bad feeling about this. Dudley propped his head up from the backseat to take a closer look.

"Relax Pet, I'll just go take a look, we might need to call the ambulance if necessary." Vernon reassured her.

He opened the driver's side of the door and headed in the direction of the body, bending over with great effort he took a closer look. It was definitely a man, turned over in a very awkward position; his side obscured his face. Vernon carefully shook the man's shoulder to try and rouse him.

"Sir, are you alright, do you need any help?"

The man stirred and Vernon backed up, the man turned over his side and Vernon finally got to see his face, or not. A silver mask covered it.

"Yes I do," the man responded with a twisted smile, "And you just gave it to me."

Vernon backed up and heaved himself to his feet, trying to get to the car immediately.

The man on the ground simply laughed, he lazily raised his wand and said in a distinctive voice, "CRUCIO!"

Vernon was a few metres away from the car when the world erupted in pain; he doubled over and began screaming at the top of his voice.

Petunia was horrified by the proceedings. She threw open her door and was rushing to Vernon's side, Dudley hot on her heels.

"VERNON!" She yelled.

She crouched down beside his writhing form trying to help him; it was a waste of effort, "PLEASE STOP, PLEASE LET HIM GO!" She called over her husband's screams.

The man, now sitting on the ground with his wand laxly pointed towards the large whale of a man, just shrugged in response and ended the curse.

Vernon stopped shaking in pain as his body began resting, his mind was awash with the refreshing sense of numbness that came when the Cruciatus was finally withdrawn. He tried to get his bearings and was not even aware when tears leaked from his eyes.

Dudley had watched the events unfold with a stoic fearfulness. When he saw tears in his father's eyes, he turned towards the man that had caused this pain.

"YOU BLOODY ARSEHOLE!" He called and ran towards him, getting ready to administer the beating of a lifetime.

"DUDLEY NO!" Petunia yelled.

The man simply waved his wand and Dudley froze mid-step, his hands strapping to his sides and his body becoming as stiff as a board, turning over and falling to the ground.

"DUDLEY!" Petunia wailed now running to her precious son who was lying on the ground as stiff as dead. Petunia would have broken down then and there had she not noticed the quick and erratic fluttering of his eyes and the slight movements of his lips.

She turned towards the man, "Why are you doing this?" She pleaded, "Please, we were leaving this country and going for good, just let us go, I promise I'll do anything, please just let us leave." She begged on her knees.

"Leaving you say?" The man said rubbing his chin in thought, "Well I guess I could let you leave, after some festivities of course."

Petunia was scared; she had no idea what this man would do to her because he had handily taken down both her men in mere minutes. She could only pray that she would survive this.

"Anything please, just let my son and husband go." She pleaded.

"Hmm, well there is one thing you could do." He said with a predatory smile.

With a swish of his wand and a muttered word, a pale semi-transparent curtain fell over where they were in the middle of the road; he then pointed his wand at Vernon and Petunia yelled in fear. Petrifying him like he did to her son, the man levitated both bodies to the side of the road, such that they were sitting up and facing the man and Petunia.

A dark fear began clutching at her heart as she realized what was about to happen.

The man smiled and moved up to her, "Now muggle, let's put that filthy mouth of yours to some use, or else I'll kill you and your family."

Tears freely falling from her eyes, Petunia began sniffing uncontrollably, her hands shook as she tried to comply.

Dudley was visibly straining against the magic holding him in place. His mother was about to be violated and there was nothing, nothing, he could do but sit and watch.

SLAP!

The man whacked her across her face, "Hurry up you little slag, I haven't got all day."

Petunia was openly crying now, her hands had pulled away the robes the man was wearing and was pulling away the tunic of his breeches. She opened her mouth and brought it closer, whimpering the whole time.

The man sighed in discontent, he caught hold of the back of her head and shoved it forward; hissing in pleasure when contact was finally made.

Dudley had one thought running in his mind the whole time: NO!

Twirling his wand in anticipation, he sat in his high-backed chair with glee. It was a good day today. He tilted his head backwards and took a deep breath to calm himself, it wouldn't do to appear so unrealistically excited over such a simple event.

But he couldn't help himself, he had finally delivered a blow home to the boy, he had finally gotten some revenge for the heaps of embarrassment and humiliation that he underwent everyday that the Boy-Who-Lived was still alive.

The door to his private chambers was knocked on. That ended his musings and he turned to look at it with expectation.

"Enter." He drawled in his somewhat serpentine voice.

The door cracked open slowly and in walked one of his most loyal followers. The man entered with his head bowed. He approached his master and bent down on one knee and waited for his master's permission to speak.

"How went the attack?" He couldn't restrain himself from asking.

"My Lord was completely right, as always, when he said that the Potter boy was no longer living with his relatives and his impregnable protection was gone. His relatives, the muggles," here the man sneered, "were caught trying to leave the country. In short

order, I eliminated his Aunt first, after a bit of fun and then tortured his Uncle for some time before killing him too."

"Good work, what about his cousin?" He asked.

The man on his knee shifted uncomfortably, "Well, My Lord, you see, um... his cousin was under my Cruciatus when the Aurors arrived and before I could finish the job, I was forced to flee..."

The statement was left hanging and the man on the floor was trembling he knew exactly what was about to come next.

Voldemort clicked his tongue in annoyance, "You surprise me, such a simple task and yet you could not fulfil it in time. I assume that the bodies are mutilated?"

"Yes, My Lord." He rushed to assure.

"Hm... Well, I believe it would be interesting to see how the cousin will react to the boy when he returns from wherever he is hiding. Has any progress been made in finding the boy?" Voldemort started a new line of thought.

The man sighed in relief, "I'm not privy to the details of that excursion under Malfoy, but I believe that they have ascertained that the boy is not within Britain, he has fled the Isles."

Voldemort sighed in exasperation, "So much trouble, and so little time." He lamented, "You may leave."

The man gratefully got up, his knee only in slight pain as he turned around and headed to the door.

"Oh and Rosier," Voldemort called out and he turned to face his master, "CRUCIO!"

The man fell to the floor screaming in agony, after ten seconds the curse was removed and he was allowed to stand up, "Failure is to be punished Rosier, you should know that, next time do not return with a half-done task. Kill the cousin at the next available opportunity."

"Y-y-yes My Lord," he stuttered as he opened the door to make his exit from the gloomy chamber.

"Magic, the most ancient, the most potent ingredient when hammering together a piece of art. What is magic? But the intricate yet basic foundation for a wielder to enact his dreams into the physical plane."

Harry tried hard not to yawn, but with every passing minute, the struggle became more stringent. It had been almost two months now since he had run away and in these two months, he had come to appreciate his Amanta like never before.

His studies in Enchantment had been fascinating if slow-paced. After his discovery or rediscovery of the Universal Law of the Magical Arts, the understanding of Enchantment came to him with greater ease. Now when he cast the levitation charm, his mind was not concentrating on the perfect swish-and-flick, his words weren't enunciating the exact win-gar-dium levi-o-sa, but his mind and his magic were overcompensating to fulfil his wishes.

Slowly, steadily, the barriers of magical understanding he had built were being torn down and rebuilt anew.

He had been taught that magic had to be willed, it had to be wielded, told and moulded with each precise step for the desired result. But Amanta, Amanta taught him that magic was free, magic was wild and magic, in its most primal form, was gentle. Why order magic, when if asked it would do the same anyway?

A blow struck.

He still chuckled at his own wide-eyed expression when he heard that impassioned speech towards the end of July.

"Is magic alive Amanta?"

He still couldn't believe he had asked that question and he still grimaced whenever he remembered the way the Amanta smacked her forehead in resignation.

"Magic is not alive, but it lives, it is not sentient, but it listens, it does not respire, but it breathes." She tried to explain.

"Uh... How can it live without being alive, listen without being sentient and breathe without respiring? That makes no sense! You're contradicting yourself." He shot back hotly.

She smiled in her own way, the smile of wisdom, of lessons learnt but not yet taught, a knowing smile, "Magic is a contradiction."

A crack was made.

He groaned pitifully and smacked his head on the table as the Amanta laughed.

"...Blythe Chezkovsky pointed out that enchantments are interlinked with transfiguration in that a transfigured object is still an object, but only when enchanted upon, is it animate. That is why we study them together..."

Then again, most of his conversations with the Amanta left him seething and feeling powerless. She had a way to make herself seem right, even when he knew, implicitly, she was wrong.

The Amanta looked at her young charge carefully. His head was tilted towards her, but his eyes were intensely focused on something right behind her. She sighed. He had drifted off again. Honestly! The boy had the attention span of a flobberworm.

"Harry!" She said with finality and broke him from his reverie of daydreaming.

"Yes Amanta?" He asked timidly knowing full well that he had been caught, yet again, for the second time in three days.

She sat down at the table and regarded him with piercing eyes, "What is it Harry? You seem withdrawn, you no longer challenge yourself in your lessons, and your fire is burning out. Have the lessons been too heavy on you?"

Harry looked away, he hated admitting defeat, but the truth was that as fascinating as it all seemed, recently it was becoming increasingly hard to focus, "I don't know Amanta, I..." he swallowed uneasily, "I guess I'm not progressing."

The foundation trembled.

She sat back in her chair and considered his response, her keen eyes narrowing into slits, "Progression is marked by the master, not the journeyman."

Harry bit his lip, "Perhaps I should be clearer?"

She folded her hands, "Do so."

Harry took a deep breath, "Its just that, when we discuss magic, our views... differ." She snorted at the understatement and waved her wand for some conjured tea, "You think of magic as this almost-entity that appreciates kindness and gentleness but I find it is an energy to wield and use. I find it hard to adapt to your style of magic – as an art – rather than a means to an end. Magic has never been profound to me, it is my saviour, it makes me wonder and it shapes the world I love, but it is just that, a very useful resource."

Amanta shook her head in a tired fashion, "Dear me, you can be so naïve sometimes boy. Start thinking like a wizard Harry."

Harry spluttered indignantly, "I am a wizard."

More cracks developed.

Amanta laid her head back on the headrest of the raised chair, "Annoying muggle-borns."

"Excuse me!" Harry retorted.

"I said you are acting like an annoying muggle-born. You're better than this!" The Amanta said with only a slight hint of a sneer.

Harry's world came crashing around him as the thought that the Amanta, the venerable and wise witch, was a prejudiced pureblood bigot!

"I am a half-blood but muggle-raised." Harry whispered, his eyes downcast to hide the burning inferno swirling in his emerald orbs, "One of my closest friends is muggle-born and she is considered the brightest witch of our generation."

Resistance was met.

The Amanta waved her hand dismissively, "That has nothing to do with it."

Harry's eyes snapped up and stared at her incredulously, "Then what does?"

Stray pieces fell.

She looked at him with a cool gaze, as if assessing him but for once, finding him lacking.

"For you magic is a fantasy, for me it is the only reality. You think it is your greatest gift, but I know that it is my birth-right and heritage. Magic is an appendage to you, it is a resource, but to me, magic is a way of life, the only way I know of." She said calmly.

Harry was speechless.

It tethered on the edge.

"I do not believe the muggle-born should be barred from the use of magic, far from it actually, but I do know that the wizard-raised will always be far superior." She said casually, "This friend you mention, she is a scholar, destined to know it all, but never to wield it. She will take years to reach the level of understanding and acceptance of magic that the wizard-raised have imbibed since before uttering their first spell. She may very well be brilliant and surpass many wizard-raised, but she will always be the anomaly, the minority, the exception, never the rule."

The pillar fell.

She sipped her conjured tea as a gob smacked expression dominated the young boy's face.

Yes, he had come to make an agreement with himself a while ago, never to get into an argument with the Amanta unless it was strictly academic. She frequently caused him to doubt himself and whatever he had believed was true and just.

There was one amazing thing about her though; she turned everything, every conversation, every spell, and every action into a lesson. There was something to learn from everything as she said. Where one day he learnt about the pureblood's viewpoint as to why they were superior to muggles, another day he learnt that banishing something was easier than summoning it back. From the philosophical to the trivial, she made him see it all, whether he wanted to or not.

"Harry, I think I have today's assignment for you for the practical portion." The Amanta said with a mischievous grin playing across her lips.

"Sure," He answered cautiously, rising from his chair and following her to the centre of the hall.

The Amanta made him stand on one side and she stood on the other, she then swished her wand and conjured a large, wooden wall. It was about six feet high and three feet wide.

"Harry, I want you to overcome this wall seven times. Only simple, everyday use spells."

Harry rolled his eyes in exasperation, something unexpected every day, after all, what was life without a little spice? As the Amanta put it.

She retreated to the sofa and sat down, sipping her half-finished tea that had been summoned from the table on the other side.

Harry faced the wooden wall and counted of the charms in his head to do this task. There were quite a few options and the Amanta's instructions were vague. He had learnt to take the instructions as they came because further questioning on the nature of his assignments tended to confuse him rather than help him.

Harry raised his wand and pointed it to himself. With a gurgled, "wingardium leviosa", he raised himself carefully from the ground, floated above the wall, and gently landed on the other side. He then turned around and faced the wall again.

"One." The Amanta intoned.

This was going to be easy.

Harry then pointed his wand at the wall and decided that a little theatrics were in order, "Expulsio!" He called loudly and the minor blasting hex impacted upon the wall.

Harry then calmly crouched down and walked through the hole he created, emerging smugly on the other side.

"That doesn't count." The Amanta said from the side.

"Why?" He fought back.

She placed a hand on her waist, "How is a blasting hex a common everyday use spell?" She asked snidely.

Harry smirked, "Try living as me, you'll realize how common it is."

The Amanta huffed but conceded ultimately.

"Fine, two." She said fixing the damage to the wall.

For his third try, Harry turned away from the wall, he pointed his wand to the floor at an angle and turning his head he roughly calculated the right projectile angle. This would be interesting and he hoped it would turn out right.

"Reducto!" He said loudly and the curse smashed the ground. The close-range of casting ensured a physical backlash of energy that sent Harry flying backwards, he smacked his lower body on the upper part of the wall and then accidentally fell over and landed unceremoniously on the ground on the other side.

He slowly righted himself and felt his body, a little sore from the blast, but nothing a good night's sleep wouldn't cure.

A little worse for wear he contemplated his fourth attempt and tried pointedly to ignore the Amanta's repressed laughter as she repaired the damage to her floor and said in a voice quivering with mirth, "Three."

Spells flew in his mind's eye as he went through his repertoire, finding one that could be improvised to suit his purposes.

"Kindly refrain from blasting yourself again." The Amanta added from the side and Harry turned to look at her with burning cheeks, "As much as you love blowing things up, I'd rather like my house stay in one piece."

Harry huffed and redoubled his efforts to find the right spell.

He glanced around at his surrounding and spotted the table nearby, he levitated it and placed it in front of the wall, then he climbed on top of it, reaching to the top of the wall and then climbed down from the other side, landing with an audible thump on the floor.

"Four."

Harry scratched his chin as he thought some more and remembered an odd spell, something Remus had taught him a while ago. An image of chewing gum shooting at Peeves and sticking to him flashed through Harry's mind.

Looking around carefully, Harry spotted the long golden ropes hanging decoratively from the curtains. With a quick severing charm he cut it off and returned to a position a few feet away from the wall. He wound one end carefully around his wand, making sure the tip was at his wand tip. With a confident air he decided that there was no better time to experiment than now after all.

"Waddiwasi!"

The rope shot forwards and hit the ceiling, affixing the tip there and the rest of the rope hung low enough for Harry to grasp it. It was nearly a foot-and-a-half away from the wall. Holding the rope in his hands Harry placed a leg on the wall and began heaving himself up.

Unfortunately, he didn't take into account that the climbing may turn out to be the hardest part. With great effort he had finally managed to take a few steps and was halfway there when disaster struck.

The already over-extended curtain accessory was straining to hold his weight. The spell he had used was after all not a sticking charm; it was a prank charm and not meant to be long lasting. The rope's tip stuck to the ceiling began coming lose.

Harry, in his heaving efforts didn't notice this but the Amanta who was observing his efforts with hawkish precision did, she could have warned him, but where would the fun be in that?

"AHHH!" Harry yelled as he fell on his bottom and the golden rope began collecting on top of his prone form lying on the ground, the traitorous end smacking his stomach.

Grumbling, he stood up and stretched his back only to feel a slight pain there, the fall had not been from a great height after all.

"That doesn't count I'm afraid." The Amanta added with an almost serious expression, the key word being 'almost'.

"Sometimes I feel you get far too much amusement through my efforts." Harry deadpanned.

"Blame me not, it is you who persevere in making each attempt more hilarious than the last." She sniffed.

Rolling his eyes heavenwards Harry picked up the rope and took a few steps backwards. Thinking and working out a new plan of action. The Waddiwai spell was temporary. He hadn't known that, this thawed his efforts, but it was a good spell to get across, had it lasted longer, he would've crossed the wall. Why hadn't he learnt a simple sticking spell again?

Biting on his lower lip and contemplating, inspiration struck.

Maybe...

Harry wound one end of the rope onto his non-wand arm and held onto it tightly, he then repeated winding it around his wand and draping the end on the wand-tip. He focused his eyes on the ceiling and picking a spot; he shot with deadly accuracy, "Waddiwasi!"

The rope moved and he was ready to allow it pick him with it when the rope stopped mid-flight and then just fell down lifelessly, hanging from his arm it was wound around. Harry stared at the unexpected result dumbly for five seconds before smacking his head amidst the Amanta's laughter. Of course the rope didn't pick him up as well! The spell force was too weak and it was rightly so, the spell was not

designed to shoot off wizards, it was designed for small and/or light objects to be used as projectiles.

Biting his inner cheek in genuine worry now, he considered another course of action and knew that the solution existed in combination. All he needed was logic.

Once again he shot the rope, this time without tying it around himself and once again the rope end flew and affixed itself on the ceiling. Harry tugged on the rope and guessed he had about two minutes to make his plan work. He pulled on the end dangling and clasped it firmly in his hand. He went as far back as the rope would permit and then ran forward as fast as he could. A few feet away from the wall, he jumped and allowed the momentum of the rope to guide him. His feet smacked on the wall and he pushed back with more force and flew backwards. The process continued and Harry quickened his pace, afraid the rope would come lose. At long last Harry swung with enough force, in mid-swing he saw the ceiling-affixed end begin to come lose, he let go of the rope and clamoured for the top of the wall. He smacked the front of his calves onto the wall but overall made it over and prevented himself from falling again. This occurred not a moment too soon as the rope fell down and gathered on the ground, utterly battered from Harry's experiments.

Harry smiled in victory as he landed his feet on the other side and rested his back on the wall, looking at the Amanta expectantly.

For her part, she just raised an eyebrow, swishing her wand, she sent the rope back into its place and said, "Five."

Harry's happiness dimmed and his expression became one of exasperation, "Anticlimactic much?"

"You give your heroics far too much credit." She responded without missing a beat.

When ready, Harry turned back and faced the wall thinking, 'now what?'

Shrugging his shoulders he tried the first thing that came to mind, he started conjuring pillows. It was the only bit of conjuration that they had covered at the end of fourth year in Transfiguration class. With excessive wand work that Harry knew the Amanta was cringing to

witness, Harry created a pile of large, plain white pillows. He then levitated them in a stack against the wall. When he tried to climb it, and realized to his dismay that the four-feet height was too much for him. Huffing at his mounting tiredness and annoyance at his less-than-average height, Harry conjured more pillows, half the amount as before and stacked them in front of the original pile. With a smile, Harry climbed the two feet high pile first and then two more feet for the second, until he took the last one atop the wall and jumped down.

"Six." She said unwillingly as she vehemently banished all the conjured pillows.

Thinking deeply Harry wondered what was left to do. What new way could he come up with to overcome the wall?

Taking a closer look, Harry remembered the wall was wooden. With a cheeky smile, he backed up and cast the simplest of first-year spells, "Incendio!"

The fire burnt the wood and began spreading to the rest of the wall. Smoke billowed and rose and the Amanta coughed in the background but didn't interrupt, instead she cast a bubblehead charm and Harry wished he knew how to cast that as well. Covering his nose and mouth with his non-wand arm, Harry waited to see the wall burn. When it looked like it was reduced to half its size, Harry cast an *augmenti* and doused the flames. It took a little work but the last of the embers were washed away and Harry easily jumped over the barely two-and-a-half-foot wall.

The Amanta nodded in satisfaction. He had completed his assignment. She cast a few mumbled spells that aired out her home and then regarded Harry with calculating eyes, "Seven," she said clearly.

Harry shrugged one shoulder with an air of nonchalance; internally he was jumping at his success. There was nothing more satisfying than a job well done.

"Harry," the Amanta said calmly approaching him and standing beside him, facing the wall that she banished and then conjured again to its original six-foot height.

"Yes Amanta?"

"What were my original instructions?" She asked openly.

Harry thought back and answered word-for-word, "To overcome the wall seven times with only everyday use spells."

"Correct." She replied with a shake of her head.

"Why did you ask?" He couldn't help himself from asking.

"Because I just wanted to make sure you had actually heard them properly. So I know I'm not wrong in handing you your grade for the day." She said waving her hand as she went towards the table where a parchment was placed and she wrote something on it in Romanian.

The Amanta had a different scoring system than the one at Hogwarts. Admittedly, it was much simpler to understand and more precise in comparisons. She gave you a number between 0 and 100 for the day's work. The highest Harry had ever received was a 59 and his lowest was a 23. In the Amanta's esteemed opinion, passing was a 65.

"So? How did I score?" He asked excitedly, determined for once that he had done well.

"Oh, you did fine." She said breezily as she handed him his parchment and then moved to stand on the other side of the wall.

Harry unfolded it and looked at the number she had circled at the top like she did every time.

17.

Harry stared at the number unblinking.

"Uh Amanta, I think you made a mistake." Harry informed her rationally, there was no way this was his worst performance ever! Nothing could be worse than the day he earned a 23, he had buggered three spells up and slept through the theory, he deserved that 23, but he did not, under any circumstances, deserve a 17 today.

The Amanta knotted her eyebrows and pulled the paper from his fingers and checked the number. The crease on her brow eased and she nodded to herself, "No it is correct Harry."

Seeing his look of utter betrayal and mounting rage, the Amanta decided to stop wasting time and get to the point.

"What was the lesson Harry?" She asked in her patronizing voice.

Harry thought hard, "To find new uses of mundane spells."

The Amanta clapped her hands and excitedly took his parchment in front of her. She then tapped the 17 with her wand and returned it to him.

Harry thought he might have gotten a bonus for the correct answer. The new score for the day read: 15.

His jaw fell open in horror. Why?

"No spell is ever mundane!" She said viciously, "It is the wizards who limit their capabilities."

"Then, the lesson is that Harry will never pass." He retorted scathingly.

The Amanta sighed in frustration, "No Harry! You got 10 points today for completing the lesson, an additional 10 for the ingenious use of that Wadiwassi spell that I was unfamiliar with. I reduced three points for the horrendous use of conjuration. The blasting spells were a means to an end but not nearly as effective as other options you could have explored so no points were awarded. The levitation spell was too obvious and did not require any creativity, so no points were awarded. The Incendio followed by the Augmenti was improperly used and the precision on both spells was neither artistically effective nor practically. They were crude spells, crudely used and gave a crude result. So no points were given. Teacher's discretionary points were also not awarded because you missed the lesson."

"What was the lesson then?" Harry asked.

"Follow the instructions with the least effort exerted." The Amanta responded calmly.

"But I did—" Harry was about to begin but stopped seeing the Amanta's expression.

"It wasn't the least effort exerted. It was far too much effort, in fact." She said matter-of-factly,

Pointing her wand to the wall, she said clearly, "Diminitio!" The wall shrunk and became one foot tall and barely had a few centimetres of width. The Amanta then stepped over the wall, now stick, and counted, "One." She stepped back with a "Two." Forwards, "Three." Backwards, "Four." Forwards, "Five." Backwards, "Six." Forwards, "Seven."

"Done." She said simply.

Harry stared slack-jawed at the injustice of the world. She had accomplished in less than one minute what took him nearly an hour.

"But-but-but—"

"I never said you had to use different spells, I just said common everyday use spells, you chose to use many of them. I said overcome it seven times, you chose to be over-smart and employ seven different ways of doing it." She said shortly.

Harry groaned in frustration and the Amanta didn't even bat an eye. He sat down on the nearby chair with his head in his hands, "I can never win, can I?"

"You have to think before acting Harry. Consider your rules, the causes that put you in a situation and the easiest possible solution will present itself. That is how you deal with problems and that is how you manage enchantments: deadly accuracy but with lightening fast thinking." She finished sadly, "Now be off with you, I have other things to do on this day. Come back tomorrow with a fresh mind and renewed spirit, I will have a surprise for you."

Harry nodded respectfully, gathered his things and left her house. He had achieved a new all-time low score, and then lowered it some more, brilliant!

"Here is the next dosage." The potions' master said seriously, "Drink every last bit of it."

The young boy grimaced in distaste; this potion tasted horrible, "Is this really necessary?" he whined.

"Do you wish to be able to continue communicating with ease?" Without waiting for an answer the potions' master continued, "I thought so, now drink up."

Pinching his nose, the boy tilted his head back and drank the potion in one large gulp. It tasted worse than it smelled, but he had to have his continuous doses of the potion if he wanted the translation magic to continue to work.

"Tell me again how this works Stefan?" He said with his mouth twisted into a vicious frown.

Stefan shrugged his shoulders and bustled around his apothecary as he answered with nervous annoyance, "The translation potion becomes part of your bloodstream when you drink it, it then flows into your brain and stimulates those parts of it that make learning a new language easy. When you immerse yourself in a place of an unknown language, this potion helps you pick up the language, no matter how great the lack of familiarity. However, the effects are only temporary, if you leave the area where it is spoken for an extended period of time, you will forget it; if the potion wears off, you will forget it as well. It is after spending a year surrounded by the language with the potion in your system that it becomes easier. Only then will you have mastered the language forever."

Harry sighed in resignation, he now knew he had to drink the horrible translation potion every week to keep up his ability to speak Romanian.

"Thank you Stefan." Harry said respectfully.

"You buy it Harry, the least I can do is tell you what you're ingesting." The aged potions' master responded.

Harry sat back in his chair in the backroom of the apothecary, trying to keep down the rising bile that aftertaste of the potion left in his

mouth. In the almost-two months that he had moved to Romania, the potions' master and he had formed a somewhat close acquaintance. He would receive his regular doses of the translation potion from the potions' master and they would talk about potions.

Stefan never had a formal schooling; his parents could never afford to send him to Durmstrang. He never even bought a wand till he was seventeen. As far as the wand arts were concerned, Stefan was and would happily remain a novice. But his family came from a long line of potions' masters and mistresses. He had followed in their footsteps and learnt the art, making his life and livelihood with its use.

"Tell me Harry, if you need this potion as badly as you do, why not brew it yourself?" Stefan asked with a quivering voice.

"I'm pants at brewing, my old potions' master thought of me as the greatest dunderhead to ever walk into his dungeon." Harry said with only a slight smile.

"Oh... I see, well, maybe he was being a bit unfair." Stefan said shakily, darting his eyes around the store.

That was another thing about Stefan; he was always on edge, always a little afraid that something terrible might strike. His paranoia reduced him to fear everything and trust nothing, a little unlike Moody's gruff response, but he was paranoid nonetheless.

Harry just ignored his response and behaviour, "He was plenty unfair, but I never learnt much in his class anyway. Potions are just not my forte."

"Well, you do get relieved from Amanta cel Cumplit everyday at seven, why not stop by the apothecary, I close at eight and I could, if you wanted of course teach you some basic potions for travel and use." Stefan offered in a quiet voice.

Harry's eyes brightened at the idea, "That would be great Stefan! I'll stop by after lessons tomorrow and you can show me how to start my own batch of the translation potion."

Stefan laughed nervously, "Baby steps Harry, start with baby steps."

With that bit of advice, Harry bid Stefan adieu and made his exit for the apothecary. It was still early, only seven pm and despite being tired, he wanted to get around the town before turning in for the night.

A little walk landed him in front of one of his favourite bars, Topirea Oala; he frequented it all the time. One of the best aspects of living in Magical Romania: they weren't stringent about your age when ordering a drink. As long as you could pay, you could get anything. It was definitely one of the older pubs on the street, but like all the other stores on the main road, it was well maintained and nothing seemed out of order.

Entering, Harry took his usual spot in one of the booths at the back. The reason he loved his booth was because it overlooked the centre lake with Ceausescu's statue in middle. In the evenings, when the lights in the streets were burning brightly, the surface of the lake shimmered and cast minute sparkles in all directions. It was a great view to behold when alone and contemplative.

The local barmaid, a Bulgarian named Sonia with bright blue eyes and an attractive face, came up to him and smiled.

"Nice to see you James. The usual?"

Harry nodded keeping his pleasant demeanour, "A glass of cheddarwine please."

Sonia nodded and headed to the bar to fix his drink. She soon returned and Harry thanked her and took a small sip of his cheddarwine. It was a local Romanian wine, sweet, with just the right amount of alcohol. Tonight, Harry was just looking to drink some wine and enjoy the view.

The reason he needed this calm was because he was exceptionally homesick that evening. It was the evening of 30th August. In less than two days, the Hogwarts Express was going to depart from Platform Nine-and-three-quarters and he wasn't going to catch it for the first time since he started school. Hogwarts was the first place he ever called home, as a wide-eyed first-year, when he walked through those halls, he knew that he could never go back, he had finally reached where he belonged. Never in the past four years, no matter what happened, had he ever entertained the notion that he

would not be returning to his home. He would not be playing Chess with Ron in the Common Room after the Welcoming Feast. He was not going to be badgered by Hermione about completing his holiday assignments. He missed it, he missed them, he missed Hogwarts, he missed his home.

"Let go of my hand!"

Harry's eyes snapped to the direction of the voice. Sonia was serving a group of rowdy men and one of them was being overtly friendly. Keeping his cool, Harry turned away, this sort of thing happened all the time in the bar, it always got sorted in the end.

"Come on pretty girl, sit with us, I'll buy you a drink." Said the man with a bushy moustache.

"Let me go!" Sonia shot back angrily and pulled herself away from his grasp, only to proceed to slap him across the face.

Silence reigned and the distinctive sound of skin meeting skin with excessive force was rung loudly in the bar.

The moustached man rose from his seat angrily. From where he sat, Harry knew that the matter had gone too out of hand and intervention was now necessary. He stood from his seat with his wand drawn and approached the group as Sonia backed away fearfully. Harry put his hand on her shoulder and she gasped in shock. On seeing it was Harry, she visibly relaxed and stood behind him.

Harry glared at the offensive man who matched it with one of his own. He too drew his wand but with the slight shake of his hand, Harry knew that the man was more than a little inebriated. This was bad. A wizard was a threat; a drunk wizard was dangerous to everyone.

Behind him both of his mates stood up as well.

'A show of solidarity, just great!' Harry thought sarcastically.

"What do you want boy?" Moustache asked menacingly.

"I think you should just let the matter drop." Harry said in a calm voice.

He snorted and shot a disarming spell at Harry.

Despite the close range, Harry managed to create a protego in record time and deflected the jinx. He pushed Sonia behind the bar and the other residents quickly scampered seeing the beginning of a brawl.

Maintaining his shield, Harry took a few steps back and kept deflecting the man's spells. Up until then, he had used nothing lethal or harmful, making Harry think that he might actually have a chance at surviving this.

Harry ended his shield, dropped to the ground and rolled away, missing all the ill-aimed spells. He got to his feet and began firing all the spells and jinxes he knew. He couldn't do anything that would afford too much damage to the bar after all.

Expelliarmus, petrificus totalus, telletegra, rictumsempra, he threw everything at him.

Despite his drunkenness, the wizards moved out of the way quickly and returned Harry's spell-fire. He looked towards his mates with raised eyebrows and they joined the fight as well. All of a sudden, Harry was avoiding spells from two directions. While the moustache wizard continued his barrage of harmless spells, the other two wizards weren't so kind in their assault. Harry was increasingly sure he was avoiding dark curses, a bone-crusher passed by him that he recognized from his fight in the graveyard. There were other spells, a sickly yellow one, a black wave with flickering whiteness along the edges. They tried to hit him but Harry kept jumping around and avoiding them.

The three wizards were closing in on him and there was very little he could do about it. He had started using Stunners, but one of them maintained a shield and Harry's quick reflexes would only carry him for so long until one of their spells hit.

What to do? What to do?

Follow the instructions with the least effort exerted.

He heard an echo of the Amanta's most recent lesson at the back of his mind.

Skipping to the side of two suspicious spells, Harry hid behind an overturned table. Without thinking, he banished it at the wizards who were surprised by the attack. While the table managed to hit the moustache wizard and threw him off-balance, the other two moved out of range fast enough.

Harry was increasingly becoming worried; these wizards weren't like the regular thugs that frequented the bar. They had the mark of trained fighters.

In their moment of distraction something clicked in Harry's head, the endless lessons of summoning came back to him; it was after all a charm he was intimately familiar with.

When the two wizards regained their standing, they began firing with renewed vigour. Harry trembled only slightly as he followed the Amanta's lesson.

"Summon whatever you need Harry, bring it forth with your magic, call it and your magic will comply."

Without batting an eye, Harry swished his wand minutely and muttered, "Accio!"

His widespread summoning aimed at the furniture now strewn in disarray. A nearby chair came hurtling and stood obediently in front of Harry, another chair from the other side of the bar heeded the summon as well and joined the former in front of the warring wizards. The new spells smashed and blasted the chairs, the broken pieces seemed to blow up and scatter, but the power of Harry's summoning called them back. Now a messy congregation of broken wood formed a rudimentary barrier.

He needed to float it in front of himself; he needed a more resounding barrier!

"Enchantment is an art, the rules are constantly bent and broken out of shape," The Amanta instructed, "Accio summons and wingardium

leviosa levitates, can you do it altogether? Focus, intend, call and create! Magic is rooted in your ingenuity, Harry."

A nearby table joined the rubble on the ground and formed a new defence. Another spell blasted it and tore it apart and the broken table, instead of throwing debris in all directions, fell as rubble at Harry's feet.

"Spot the spark of ingenuity, Harry, feel your magic and wonders will fall at your feet."

In one sheer moment, as the next barrage of attacking spells took form on the wizards' lips, Harry felt his magic: it was wild, frightened and screaming to help.

The spark of ingenuity struck.

"Accio leviosa!" Harry intoned sharply, calling all his magic and sending it forth, unformed and distorted to do his bidding.

His knees weakened, his arms ached, his body felt drained as an unusual amount of energy flew from his system.

The response was immediate. The rubble in front of Harry stood in midair and floated, two new spells attacked it and desecrated it further, but it reconvened and held on. More tables and chairs joined the floating rubble as Harry continued to back away. The wizards, even if they tried to move and attack from a new vantage point could not get a single spell in as the furniture had formed a semi-circle around Harry as he stood in a corner, directing his magic to defend at all costs.

Rubble built up and Harry's tiredness increased. A stray spell broke through his barrier and Harry ducked his head in time to avoid its impact. The wall behind his head cracked and spouted wood. Harry gulped; the wizards attacking him were getting angry.

With a mighty push, Harry did the only thing he could think of, he forced the magic forward, imbuing it into every piece of rubble and debris. It was draining, but Harry had no other choice, a banishment charm wouldn't work because it was severely limited by its scope. However the prank spell, Waddiwasi, was loosely enough

constructed that with enough magic poured in, results could be achieved.

"Waddiwasi!" He loudly exclaimed as the gathered rubble floating just a second before, took on a life of its own and attacked.

The three standing wizards tried to duck for cover only to be pushed back by the sheer amount of debris being hurled in their direction. In a matter of seconds they were rubble-strewn and buried underneath it and just like that, the brawl ended.

Harry's back hit the wall behind him tiredly, he slid down as a wave of exhaustion and disbelief overtook him. Physically, he was spent but his mind whirled as suddenly, it all began to make sense. All of it just clicked!

Barely a moment had elapsed when a hand broke through the surface of the dirt covering. The brief period of lull ended as a body of a very enraged wizard emerged, covered head-to-foot with sticky broken furniture and pieces of wood. He clutched his wand to his side in an iron-grip.

Harry simply did not have the strength for retaliation.

"Stupefy!"

The raging wizard's eyes flew open in shock and he collapsed to the floor in an unconscious heap. Harry looked to his saviour through semi-hooded eyes, an imposing figure with a drawn wand stood directly behind the only wizard that survived Harry's attack. The figure quickly rushed towards Harry, bending down in front of the exhausted boy, the person observed him.

With a distinctive click of his tongue, he levitated Harry and quickly made an exit from the bar. Harry was scared; someone who could very well kill him in his time of weakness had apprehended him.

Minutes passed and Harry called upon the last vestiges of his strength, he muttered the counter to the levitation charm and fell to his knees. With laboured breath he shakily got to his feet, his wand sluggishly pointed at the hooded wizard. Saviour or not, he would not trust anyone.

"Who are you?" He blurted with thinly concealed strain.

The wizard sighed, as if in exasperation. He moved his hand to his hood and pulled it down to reveal... a girl!

A pale face with amber eyes looked back at him, her midnight-black hair mingling with the colours of the night, her lips quirked in amusement.

Momentarily floored at this revelation, Harry allowed his attention to waver and with lightning-quick accuracy, the girl disarmed him and held his wand in her hand.

Defenceless, Harry asked again, "Who are you?"

"That is not of consequence." She responded in accented Romanian, "You're a fool to have gotten into a fight with those men. You were lucky I intervened in time or the barmaid would be scraping your remains off the walls."

Grinding his teeth in annoyance, Harry viciously pushed down his mounting tiredness, "I was handling it well by myself or did you not see me bury them? Who are you?"

The girl smiled wider at this, "I did see you bury them, by an impressive and yet monumentally idiotic waste of magic. Honestly? Spell combination and multiple banishments at one go? I should say that it is a testament to your resilience that you're even standing right now."

Brushing aside her veiled facetiousness, he persevered, "Thank you for your critique, but you did nothing to help, now did you? Stunning a wizard from the back? Is that how you mark yourself as capable, I believe the more apt term is a coward."

The smile faded and was replaced with a dark look, apparently Harry had hit a nerve, but she smoothed her face out again and her angry expression relaxed, "For someone who is magically exhausted and defenceless, you seem far too confident."

"Look," Harry said taking a step forward even as a wave of dizziness assaulted his mind, "I'm glad you helped me, now can I have my

wand back and we can go our own separate ways, pretend we never met."

She twisted her face into a look of mock-hurt, "And here I thought you wanted to know who I was? Shame on you for leading a woman on."

Summoning the last few ounces of his energy Harry tried to appeal to her, "Thank you for your help, now please, return my wand."

He knew his expression was pained and his aches were not unknown to her judging by the truly predatory glint in her eerily iridescent amber eyes, "I'm afraid you've intrigued me young wizard."

Her eyes unfocused for a few seconds, the light disappearing and reappearing, something a casual glance wouldn't have spotted.

She smiled knowingly and threw his wand to him, "Next time let the barmaid handle her own affairs."

Harry snatched the wand from the air, his seeker reflexes ever useful.

He then pointed his wand at her, no matter what, this girl or woman, whatever she was, unsettled him. She just smiled widely at his reaction, displaying for the first time her full-set of white teeth in an unusually bright grin, "A healthy paranoia, my you're full of surprises, aren't you?"

She turned around and began walking away without another word; Harry didn't drop his stance until she was a good distance away.

She then turned and looked at him, "Since you asked so nicely, my name is Cassandra." She twirled and dissipated with a soft 'pop'.

Harry sighed in relief, his shoulders sagging and his feet dragging. He knew he didn't have the energy to go back to the hotel; he'd collapse on the way. Taking the turn for the Main Street, he approached one of the only two people he trusted in Romania.

Knocking on the door of the apothecary, he battled with himself to keep his eyes open as Stefan bustled to the door with a small candle in hand.

"Harry?" He asked worriedly, seeing him holding himself up using the outer wall near the door for support.

"Bar...fight...tired...sleep here?" Harry mumbled.

Stefan opened the door and shook his shoulder, "of course, come right in."

Harry took one step, missed, tripped and fell into the potion master's waiting arms, his tired mind and bedraggled and battered body spent.

The honey-heavy dew of slumber finally claimed him.

Heavy eyes gently opened to assess their surroundings. He was in a small room, dusty by all accounts. On the far side, a single, floor-to-ceiling window was thrown open and light was flooding in to indicate the morning sun's rise.

He gently raised himself from his curled up position, his eyes marking the room with growing tension, he had no idea where he was.

The unconscious fist of his right hand unfastened and he instinctively called out with his magic, his wand zooming from the bedside table into his waiting palm. He breathed a sigh of relief feeling the cool wood of his wand under his burning fingertips.

With groggy motions, he pulled back the bed sheets and placed his feet firmly on the wooden ground. Feeling his daze subside, he collected his bearings and stood up.

A wave of nausea assaulted him and had he not caught hold of the edge of the headboard in time, he would have doubled over. He groaned in annoyance, he was in the throes of the worst hangover ever and he had not even consumed any alcohol the night before.

What was happening?

The events of the past evening came careening back to him: The whispered lessons, the troubled barmaid, the angry wizards and the mysterious woman.

Putting aside his musings, Harry ventured forth through the only door that exited his small room. He still had no idea where he was. Pointing his wand in front of him with a thankfully steady hand, Harry took one cautious step at a time, never letting his defensive stand waver for even a second. The hallway outside his room was small, with two other doors to explore. Trusting his instincts, Harry opened the door on the far-end.

A veritable barrage of smells assaulted his senses. He had to restrain himself from covering his nose and once again, he wished he knew the bubblehead charm. Venturing forth, he recognized the room he was in, somewhat, there were bubbling cauldrons and racks upon racks of potion ingredients in all directions.

"Harry?"

He whirled around with lightning speed and pointed his wand at the source of the voice, a curse on his lips.

For the intruder's part, he just screamed in an undignified way and dropped what he was holding. The vial fell to the floor and broke into pieces.

"Stefan?" Harry asked uncertainly.

The aged Russian potions' master placed a hand on his heart and his eyes were wide and stared at the young wizard in fear, surprise and a tinge of irritation.

"What is with you? You scared me!" Stefan berated, momentarily forgetting his previous fear to be replaced by his mounting ire.

Harry's eyes were downcast in shame and he bit his lower lip.

"I'm really sorry Stefan." Harry said sincerely, "Reparo!"

The vial reassembled and flew back into the potions' master's waiting hand.

"May that be a lesson to you Harry, never point a wand at an unsuspecting soul in a potions' chamber. The results could be volatile!" He told him vehemently, "You were lucky this vial was recently emptied! What if I had shredded hellbore inside? Or venomous flobber-trails? The whole place would have gone up in flames!"

Nodding sheepishly, Harry responded, "I'm sorry, when I woke up I forgot where I was and I thought I was being cautious."

Stefan pinched his brows in consternation, "Never mind," he said in resignation and approached the closest cauldron that was frothing with a purplish-green liquid.

He took his iron stirrer and began twirling it in exact concentric counter-clockwise stirs, Harry stood there motionless, unwilling to thaw the kind potions' master's concentration for the second time in five minutes.

When Stefan seemed satisfied with his efforts he turned to Harry, "Now, explain to me what exactly happened to you? Why were you so severely magically exhausted that I had to force a restorative draught down your throat? And most importantly, what happened at the Topirea Oala last night that caused the entire bar to be shut down for the next week?"

"Well," Harry said with a sardonic grin, "That's a long story actually."

Stefan did not look amused, he pulled up a chair beside his cauldron and indicated Harry to take a seat, "I have the time."

Harry was reasonably well rested as he left the apothecary and made his way to the Amanta's home for his daily lesson. Although Stefan looked sceptical when he said he was fine, he simply handed him a pepper-up potion and told him to use it if necessary. Harry placed it in his bag and thanked the potions' master for his concern.

Entering through the main door, Harry took off his shoes and stood in the Main Hall, waiting for the Amanta to make an appearance.

"Well, well, well, look whose here?" Came a faint drawl from behind him.

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end and Harry turned with his wand held in hand and eyes blazing.

The amber-eyed brunette laughed at his action, she didn't even move; let alone reach for her own wand. Her hand stood poised in a position of utter leisure near her face, a cigarette in-between her two fingers.

"We have to stop meeting like this." She commented dryly, snapping her right hand in front of the cigarette and creating a small flame to light it.

Harry's mouth was dry and his mind awirl with possibilities as to why this strange woman was in his Amanta's house, "Where's the Amanta?" He growled out.

Her brows crinkled in concentration only to smooth out a moment later, "You mean old Schimba?" The girl/woman shrugged her shoulders nonchalantly, "She must be running around somewhere."

"Harry! What are you doing?" Came the angry squawk that was his Amanta's voice without a doubt. His wand still trailed on the woman, Harry tilted his head in the Amanta's direction that had just entered the Main Foyer from her bedroom.

"This woman is in your home Amanta." He said matter-of-factly.

"Now dear boy, be respectful, you know my name, it is Cassandra." She called in a sultry voice.

"Harry, put your wand away! She is an old acquaintance of mine and currently, my guest!" The Amanta huffed, drawing her own wand and pointing it at Harry.

Harry was not convinced, but he trusted his Amanta, "Alright."

He lowered his wand and put it away, "I don't trust you." He said pointedly to Cassandra.

A tinkering laugh escaped her lips and she clapped her hands in amusement.

"You were right Schimba, this boy is definitely worth having come down to Romania for. His paranoia is..." she took a few steps forward and licked her lips as if he were a dish to eat, "refreshing."

Harry backed away, suddenly even warier of this woman; he took a few tentative steps and stood beside the Amanta, never letting his eyes waver from the woman.

"Why is she here Amanta?" Harry asked in a neutral voice.

"I have some business to attend to for the next month in Zagreb. She will continue your training in my absence and I will pick it up when I return." The Amanta informed him calmly.

Harry finally snapped his eyes at her, a look of betrayal flashing prominently but the Amanta pretended not to notice.

"Cassandra, he is a willing student with tremendous potential, but be wary, he has the concentration span of a flobberworm! Keep him engaged or you will have failed me." The Amanta intoned sharply.

The woman for her part answered the Amanta with only a piercing look. "As you wish Schimba."

The Amanta seemed satisfied with that response, "Right, I'll be leaving now," she said and levitated her trunk from her bedroom, "Goodbye Harry, I leave you in capable hands."

Harry, for his part, was too dumbstruck to respond, his jaw hanging open as the Amanta walked towards her front door.

"Goodbye Cassandra." She said neutrally and with one last withering, inscrutable look passing between the two formidable witches, the Amanta left.

The door clicked shut and the two remaining magicals regarded each other, searching eyes assessing and analyzing.

"Before you worry, I have sworn to Schimba never to reveal anything that transpires in the next month to anyone or anything without her express permission. You have nothing to fear." She said seriously.

Harry's racing heartbeat calmed slowly, "Thank you."

"I must admit my surprise when Schimba mentioned she was mentoring the renegade Boy-Who-Lived." Cassandra said breezily, "You've caused quite the stir in Britain with your escapade."

Harry tensed, "Why would you care?"

The lady shrugged with a mischievous smile and a malevolent glint in her eyes, "You have a role to play young Harry, one that you are still unfamiliar with, but all will be clear soon."

Cassandra then turned and walked into the garden, "Come along."

Harry was rightly worried now; he followed her outside but stood near the door, refusing to move on.

Cassandra looked at him with irritation, "I have sworn to keep your secret and not to harm you, there is no greater protection."

"You know who I am, my full name, I think courtesy begets I know yours." Something inside him, just knew – a deep instinct called to him to know about this woman, he was connected to her in some way.

"My name is Cassandra and I was once a witch, but during my nineteenth year of life, a vampire sired me." She said cherishing the priceless look of shock on his face, "Now you know why I was sworn not to harm you, not even in bloodlust or my magic would claim my undead life in forfeit."

Harry tried to process his thoughts, she's a vampire, she's a vampire, BLOODY HELL WHAT WAS THE AMANTA THINKING! SHE'S A VAMPIRE!

"Trust me Harry, I could not harm you even if I wanted, you are marked in a manner that transcends any oath, protecting you from harm until you meet your fate." She said eerily.

It's okay, it's okay, the Amanta wouldn't leave me at this witch-vampire's mercy if she thought my safety was an issue. Well actually she would to get a good laugh, but nothing to ever kill me, she wouldn't go that far.

"Okay." Harry replied with a calm he did not possess, "You still didn't fully answer my question though."

The vampire smiled, "You are a keen one, very well. I am Cassandra of Clan Sierra of Vladivostok. When I lived as a witch, I was called Cassandra Sybil Trelawney."

His breath caught in his throat as the name struck a cord, "Oh bloody hell."

AUTHOR NOTES:

1. The articles and laws of the Constitution of the Wizengamot is an AU addition.
2. The improvisation of the Waddiwasi spell is an AU idea.
3. Sonia is a somewhat common Bulgarian name.
4. Spell combination is an AU idea.
5. The Amanta's expressions, definitions and explanations of magic are all AU ideas.
6. Cassandra was mentioned in Canon as being the great-great-grandmother of Sybil Trelawney and she was a true Seer. It is originally a Greek name attributed to a princess that was famed because of her prophetic abilities.

If you spot any grammatical errors and/or inconsistencies, PM me or leave it in a review and I'll change it asap!

Leave me a REVIEW and make me SMILE!

Any suggestions or comments about plot, characterization or anything else are fully welcome (that's a polite way of saying flames away). I will get back to you as soon as possible. Also if you plan on raising a concern in your review or leaving a scathing remark, log-in or leave an email address so I can reply back.

Thanks for reading guys!

~ Gatonio.

CHAPTER THREE

KEEP HOLDING ON

So far away, I wish you were here,
Before it's too late, this could all disappear.
Before the doors close and it comes to an end,
With you by my side, I will fight and defend.
Keep holding on,
'Cause you know we'll make it through, we'll make it through
Just stay strong,
'Cause you know I'm here for you, I'm here for you.
There's nothing you could say
Nothing you could do,
There's no other way when it comes to the truth.
So keep holding on,
'Cause you know we'll make it through, we'll make it through.

Keep Holding On ~ Avril Lavigne

The platform was buzzing with muggles, like it did every year. His trunk was haphazardly packed and his mother would be owling him many belongings he had forgotten like every year. Muggles gave him and his family strange looks as they passed by, nothing new there either. Passing through the hidden gateway of Platform Nine-and-three-quarters occurred without a hitch.

As he stood there, feasting his eyes upon the scarlet train with steam billowing from its chimney, wizards and witches surrounding him, hugging loved ones, teary goodbyes and excited reunions

abound. Students were discussing summer vacations, homework, new teachers, adventures, a new year at their beloved school of magic.

He was infuriated: Plain, simple and flat. He was infuriated because he wasn't part of them; he wasn't sharing in their goodbyes and wide grins, their discussions and anxieties. He was standing with his trolley now abandoned, a trunk trailing behind him as he followed along listlessly, trying to care, trying with all his might to give a rat's arse, but he just couldn't do it.

The voices around him drowned out and the chatter was non-existent as he carefully cast an eye at the gathered students. None of them knew, and none of them cared; none of them were affected in the slightest.

Everything was the same, except for the one thing that changed it all. Even though nothing had physically altered, without Harry Potter, it was alien, disfigured and strange. Oxymoronic much?

A light hand was tentatively placed on his shoulder. With a jerk, he was brought back into the world, sounds, noises, smells, voices, sensations assaulted his numb senses and his observations ceased.

He turned to look into wide, doe-like cinnamon eyes, "The Prefects have a meeting in their compartment."

He nodded dumbly, as he stared at her concerned visage, her bushy-brown hair valiantly tied back with a Weasley-red band. He couldn't help but wonder, would she be next to disappear whether voluntarily or not?

"You need to come with me too." She insisted in a slightly louder voice.

He tilted his head as he considered her words, forgetting momentarily why they were directed towards him. His eyes travelled down his shirt and he saw what she was looking at, the shiny red badge with a 'P' on it.

"Ron? Are you alright?" She asked placing both hands with a little difficulty on his shoulders; he was much taller than her after all.

He snapped out of his reverie, there would be time for it later, "I'm fine Hermione, why don't you go on? I have something to discuss with Mum and I'll meet you there."

She was hesitant; they were all hesitant around him these days, walking on eggshells as if he was likely to explode any second. That's what truly surprised them, he never exploded, he never ranted, hell, he never even reacted. That's what unsettled them even more. Ever since Harry's disappearance, he had been calm and collected.

With a slow nod, Hermione backed away and with a little help from him, loaded her trunk onto the train and headed off. Ron for his part picked up the trunk and walked to his mother who was fussing over her newly seventeen-year old sons.

"Don't do any mischief now! It's your final year, about time you became serious!" She huffed at the two.

"Yes Mum." They intoned in a drab monotone, evidence of them having this conversation many times in the past was unnecessary, it was obvious.

"Now be good, I need to speak to Ronnie." The twins smirked and turned towards him with identical raised eyebrows.

Under normal circumstances, his mother's use of his childhood nickname would be embarrassing to a new frontier, but these weren't normal circumstances and Ron wasn't who he used to be.

The twins' smiles drooped ever-so-slightly at Ron's non-reaction. They walked away, their heads bent together as Ron came and stood in front of his mother, who gave him a kind smile. She affectionately rubbed his nose muttering about some dirt on there, but for once, he didn't oppose.

"Take care Ron and write to your old Mum once in a while. I'd love to know what happens at Hogwarts. Have fun, but not too much fun, I don't think my frail heart could take it if you got into any more adventures." She sighed and kissed his forehead.

A small smile crept to his lips and Ron Weasley gave his mother a light peck on her cheek.

"Love you Mum."

Mrs. Weasley smiled brightly and engulfed him in a bone-crushing hug that he was all too used to.

Disentangling himself from his mother, Ron dragged his trunk, hopped on the train and heaved it up with him. He then set off in search of his compartment.

Towards the end of the train, he finally found Hermione sitting with Ginny, Neville and surprisingly, Luna Lovegood.

He opened the door and said 'hello' to Neville and Luna while putting away his trunk. Hermione then stood up and indicated that they needed to attend the Prefect's meeting.

"Wait! You're the Fifth Year Gryffindor Prefect?" Neville asked askance.

He nodded lightly and looked in Neville's direction as Hermione and Ginny shared a worried look.

Neville, recognizing the tension in the compartment immediately downed his suspicious tone, "Oh, uh, good on you mate. Congratulations!"

Ron smiled at his cover-up as Neville smiled uneasily with a thumbs-up. He shook his head and regarded Neville with an amused look, "You thought it would be Harry, didn't you?"

Silence. Dead silence enveloped the compartment and the only sound was the low humming coming from Luna Lovegood who was reading The Quibbler upside-down.

"Well, um...yeah, but that doesn't mean you don't deserve it!" He added quickly.

"It's alright Neville, I agree with you." Ron said politely taking in the wide-eyed looks of the three Gryffindors, "Hermione, Prefect meeting, we need to leave."

She nodded and blushed, walking forward and exiting in front of him and he followed suit. They walked in a somewhat awkward silence as Hermione was trying to voice something but didn't know how. In all his years of knowing the girl, Ron knew not to try and interrupt her thought process, she'd ask whenever ready.

"Did you mean that?" She asked in a soft voice as they approached the front of the train where the Prefect Compartment was located, "About Harry being more deserving than you?"

Great, she wants to rub it in, "No, I just lied to Neville for the heck of it," he answered facetiously, "What do you think Hermione?"

She flushed and her cheeks turned a lovely hue of pink, "Well no need to be rude! I was just going to say that I didn't agree with you, that...you know... Harry deserves it more."

Ron eyed her suspiciously, but inside his heart was pounding, did she mean what he thought she meant? Did she actually pick him over Harry for once? Did he finally have a chance?

"You..." he gulped as sweat developed on his brow. He averted his eyes to the compartments they were passing as he realized with dawning horror that the prefect Compartment was close; he needed to know!

"You think I deserve it more?"

There, he asked it! His throat was dry, his voice a bit scratchy, his heartbeat raced and his eyes were pointedly looking away.

"Well...no."

Defeat.

"You both deserve it equally for varied reasons. Pitting the two of you in comparison is unfair." She said contemplatively not seeing the hurt look crumpling Ron's face.

"Of course," 'You think Harry is still better, but won't come outright and say it in front of me.' He completed in his head.

To think he actually thought that he might... That they might...

"We've reached Ron!" Hermione said jovially as she slid open the compartment door and walked in. He followed her in indolently.

'We haven't reached yet Hermione, but soon, hopefully, we will...'

A feast is a feast, a momentous occasion for all to gather and dine, to drink and make merry. A joyous event that unites whether Slytherin or Gryffindor, white or black, they eat the same food and celebrate the same juncture.

The Welcoming Feast rightly deserved its name. What could be more inviting than piles upon piles of shepherd's pie, potatoes and chicken, or a goblet full of pumpkin juice? The ambiance was radiating pleasure and thrumming with an undertone of excitement. Students regrouped after a long summer apart, stories were exchanged and pleasantries were made. For one rare night, the lines that separated one House from another were blurred as students mingled and intermingled with each other, walked across the four long tables to have quiet conversations and smother giggles of summer conquests achieved. First-years were equal parts terrified and in awe. The ceiling of the Great Hall lit beatifically with thousands of pure white candles, spanning the wide horizon of the night sky illusion, impeccably mimicking the mood of the evening: Clear, starlit and shrouded in darkness.

All was right in the world; the feast was as perfect as the one before it. Yet, it was diminished, daunting and unfulfilling.

He was silent as his blue eyes observed those seated around him. They looked so happy, so uncaring, so unbothered. They did not see the missing seat beside him, left empty for one who was not going to come that evening, they did not feel the emptiness that he felt so poignantly. They were indifferent, blasé without a fault.

His mind wandered as it often did in times like this. On this particular occasion, he remembered the time that started this confusing phase of his life. The moment that shocked and perplexed him like never before and he was forced to reassess himself and his loyalties.

Grimmauld Place, certainly a grim home. Ron scowled in distaste. Why would anyone want to raise a family in a house like this one?

Even in its prime, Ron was certain that it was dark and gloomy to the core, a dark home like no other.

'No wonder Sirius ran away as soon as he could,' he mused.

The floor was wooden but always seemed to be covered in a layer of dust. He was certain that the creepy house-elf came back and dirtied the rooms once they spent the day cleaning them. The walls were covered in ugly fungal growths or worse, portraits of members of the Black family. He still hadn't come to a decision of which was worse. The room they were in was Ginny and Hermione's room. Ginny had stepped out because she had been asked to, but of course, she left with firm promises to have the secrets of Mrs. Weasley's meeting divulged to her later on. Hermione was sitting on her bed and Ron was seated on Ginny's. The two were trying to find something to amuse themselves with as they waited; anything was better than the awkward silences and wayward glances they shot at each other every now and then.

"Ron?" pestered Hermione.

"For the last time Hermione, I don't know why Mum told us to wait here for her, she said it was important. Now just settle down and wait, she'll be here soon enough." Honestly the girl had intelligence in spades but patience was a virtue that utterly eluded her.

She huffed and looked away, her face frowning; she was muttering something.

"What was that?" He asked askance.

She looked at him with burning brown eyes, "I said that I can't wait for Harry to get here, at least the company will be decent then."

An angry monster railed in his chest and howled like Remus on a full moon. He was about to retort with something equally scathing when Mrs. Weasley finally entered.

Upon seeing his mother, Ron immediately got to his feet. Her eyes were bloodshot and tearstains lined her cheeks.

"Mum what's wrong?" He asked anxiously.

"Is everything okay?" Hermione asked simultaneously.

"I think you two should sit down for this," she said in a strained voice.

Against his better judgement, Ron complied and so did Hermione. The two teens resumed their previous seats on the beds and Mrs. Weasley walked in-between them. She pulled out a parchment and handed it to Hermione and then one to him.

"Who's this from Mum?" Ron asked turning the letter once-over in his hands.

Hermione inhaled sharply, "It's from Harry!" She said in a second.

"How do you know that?" Ron and Mrs. Weasley directed towards her.

She blushed under their scrutiny, "I've checked enough of both Ron's and Harry's homework assignments in the past, I can recognize their near-illegible scrawls in a heartbeat."

Mrs. Weasley nodded absently at the explanation and Ron was unsure if he should be irked by the comment or secretly pleased that she was so intimately familiar with his nuances... Well also Harry's, but he'd pretend like that wasn't true for the moment.

"Why did he send us letters Mrs. Weasley?" Hermione eyeing her letter suspiciously.

Mrs. Weasley made a valiant attempt to hide her tears but Ron knew better. Due to Hermione's presence, he didn't call his mother out on it, but asked her something else in its stead.

"Did something happen to Harry Mum? Is he okay?" He asked in a soft voice.

Mrs. Weasley swallowed a lump in her throat, "He's... That is to say Harry has... decided to run away."

A moment of silence and then chaos reigned.

"WHAT!" Hermione squealed, ripping open her letter and going through its contents at lightning speed. Her eyes growing wider with

each word she comprehended, her lips quivering. When she finished the letter she crumpled it against her chest and tears fell from her eyes.

"Oh Harry," she moaned sadly, her chest heaving with sobs.

Mrs. Weasley gathered her in her arms and hugged her tightly, "Professor Dumbledore will find him Hermione, he'll do everything in his might, but Harry will be found, don't you worry."

Hermione nodded along, trying courageously to abate her tears.

"I have to ask Hermione, has he given any clues as to where he's gone to? The other letters were frustratingly vague and nothing came of them." Mrs. Weasley asked kindly.

Hermione shook her head; she then ironed out the parchment and reread it. Upon finishing, more tears fell but she shook her head resolutely, "N-Nothing."

Mrs. Weasley nodded, "I was afraid of that."

Hermione stood up and headed to the door, "If you'll excuse me for just a second."

She opened it and left, the door banging back into place with her departure.

Ron had his mouth hanging open dumbly for the majority of the time. He still couldn't believe the pace with which events unfolded.

Mrs. Weasleys looked at her youngest son with fondness and sadness, "Ronnie, please open your letter."

With shaking hands, he pulled out his parchment and unfolded the missive:

Dear Ron,

I'm not really sure what to say mate. I'm gone and will be gone for some time if I have anything to say about it. I don't mean to leave everyone back there during such troubling times, but, let's be honest Ron, what can I possibly do? I'm a fourth-year student at Hogwarts

and not brilliant by a long shot, so I gathered that I should allow the adults to handle this situation. I've done enough damage already.

Last time Cedric died and I'm afraid to even think who would be next. Will it be you? Hermione? Your family? I don't think I'll be able to live with myself if any one of you died because of your association with me. Hermione's probably told you what kind of a picture The Prophet has painted of me recently, what the Ministry is trying to do to make me out to be a deranged delinquent. I can deal with it Ron, I know I can, but I don't want to put Hermione and you through it as well. Why should the two of you be ostracized because we're friends? You'll deserve better than to be considered the best mates of a boy who has Voldemort's mark carved on his forehead. Although, by your non-responses this summer, I don't even know what to believe anymore.

I hope that you understand my reasons and someday, when I return, we can still be friends.

Harry.

"Well Ron?" Mrs. Weasley asked when he finished the letter and put it aside.

He shook his head in the negative. His face was completely blank, devoid of emotions as his insides churned under the brunt of a cacophony of conflicting feelings. In the simple life of Ron Weasley, for the first time, he was confronted with an unbelievable conundrum.

Should he blame Harry? Curse him for leaving them in such dire times? Call him the bane of Gryffindor? Be outraged at his cowardice, disloyalty and implied betrayal in friends who had stood by him through thick and thin?

Should he instead sympathize with him and understand his reasons instead? Feel guilty for supposedly ignoring him when he was told to do so? He knew that Harry wasn't a coward. No coward would go face a basilisk for someone else's sister, no a coward would try to memory-charm them and try to take credit for their discoveries (damn you Lockhart!).

What should he do? What was the right reaction? Should he follow Harry's advice and pretend he never existed in their lives, allow him to phase out and try and be 'normal' for once?

A hand clamped on his shoulder gingerly, it seemed diffident, but forthright. He turned his head and regarded the one who impeded upon his stupor.

"Ron, your plate is empty, you haven't eaten anything." Her voice was like honey, lilting with her trademark mothering tone and concern.

He shrugged slowly, "I guess I'm not hungry Hermione." He answered in a soft voice.

Her eyes widened in shock and her hand on his shoulder clamped tightly. Brown orbs softened and glistened with the barest hint of tears, "Ron, please eat something. It's most unlike you not to."

His building temper flared, but he pushed it down. His ire, his incomprehension at the cruelty and bluntness of the world was not to be directed at her. She was the only one that actually cared as much as he did. Yet he failed to understand how she managed to grow into this situation so well.

He nodded and piled his plate, eating at a sedate pace while mulling his thoughts. He didn't realize it, but everyone around the two of them had gone silent during their exchange.

The tension was building and a confrontation was underway, the Weasley temper could only be moderated for so long.

Shepherding first-years was a tedious task. Who would think that those marauding little midgets could be so cumbersome? Was it that difficult to stay in line, to follow directions and be quiet? The role of Prefect was becoming less and less glamorous with each passing moment.

Finally, he settled beside Hermione in their usual seats by the blazing fire in Gryffindor dormitory. He had to physically restrain himself from turning every few seconds to ask Harry about Quidditch or propose a game of Wizard's Chess only to be dismayed by his continued absence.

One would wonder why Ron was so affected by his friend's escapade. Why was he so distraught and distracted when he too had ignored his friend for a short period the year past during the Goblet of Fire fiasco?

Blue eyes stared lifelessly into the fire, trying to divine an invisible answer in the dancing embers. His mind drifted back to a time long gone, when Harry had pulled him aside after the First Task. When he had made a solemn swear of loyalty to his friend.

The atmosphere was brimming with joy. Gryffindor House had been done proud because Harry Potter had bested the Horntail, the most ferocious of the Dragon Task. Everyone celebrated his victory; cups of butterbeer spiked with firewhisky were passing hands. Excited whispers were spoken in each other's ears as they regaled the events of the First Task, when Harry Potter had won back his popularity.

Ron was sitting beside his best mate who was smiling widely, a golden egg held tightly in his hands. At the time he didn't know it, but on reflection he should have: Harry's smile was a little too forced, his eyes weren't sparkling like they did when he was truly happy like when they won the Quidditch Cup, his body was tense, held in a mild position of defence. None noticed it, or at least, Ron didn't.

The partygoers had thinned, many choosing to retire for the evening after the enthusiastic events of the day. Ron was carrying on a lively conversation with Seamus, the two discussing the finer points of Harry's nosedive for the golden egg and how eerily similar it was to his Quidditch games.

"Ron?" came a whispered call.

He turned his head and found Harry looking at him.

"Yeah mate?"

"May I have a word?" He said urgently.

Ron nodded nonchalantly and the two Gryffindor Fourth Years quietly left for their dormitories. Opening the door, they found it

empty, it seemed like all three of their other roommates were still at the party.

"What is it?" Ron asked neutrally.

He sighed, his tense posture receding to finally unveil his real inner turmoil, his shoulders slumped and his knees bent slightly in weariness.

"Are you okay mate?" Ron asked.

"I know I forgave you for not believing in me." Harry stared and Ron instantly froze, he hoped that they could put that past them, "But I don't think I really did."

No words were spoken, what could be said in such a situation?

Finally, Ron hazarded a response, "Well, I'm...um...sorry, okay? I know I should have believed you and I didn't." He mumbled nervously, "but there's nothing I can do to possibly take it back and trust me, I want to take it back."

Harry nodded along with his words and finally looked up to fix his green eyes with Ron's, "I know you're sorry Ron, you're a terrible liar as it is and even more terribly proud to ask for forgiveness if you thought you weren't in the wrong."

Ron shrugged, not knowing if he should thank Harry or feel offended at the veiled insult.

"What troubles me though is if you will do it again." He looked at Ron intensely, "You, of all people, know exactly how unpredictable and dangerous being me entails. When the going gets tough again, will you still support me as a friend, or will you walk away?"

Ron spluttered incoherently at the jab at his loyalty, "What are you saying? That you can't trust me?"

Harry folded his hands in resignation, "I want to trust you Ron, I really do, but the question is: can I? How do I know that next year or hell, even tomorrow, if something unexpected pops up, you won't desert me again?"

Ron walked to his bed, trying to bring his temper under control. It was this very same temper that had threatened his friendship in the first place. This was a decision he had to make. Did he want to stick by Harry? Gryffindor pride and daring adventures aside, did he want the stress of being Harry Potter's best mate? He had enough to live up to as it was, being obscured in the wake of Harry's fame and power, could he live with that?

Who sent Hermione back to help him in First Year? Who saved Ginny from a bloody basilisk when he didn't even know her, only because she was his sister? Who came running to save him when a mad dog dragged him to the Whomping Willow, his own life be damned? Who stood by him when Malfoy insulted him? Who didn't give a rat's arse about his lack of wealth and befriended him anyway?

Harry never asked him of anything, just his friendship: innocent and simple. Was it worth losing such a friend, no matter what the odds?

Ron had made his decision; he looked at Harry with uncharacteristically determined blue eyes, Harry stood in the centre of the room, his hands still folded, regarding him with unflinching green eyes, "Harry Potter, upon my honour as a Weasley, as a wizard and a friend, I pledge to support you, to be the friend you rightly deserve and a brother in all but blood."

Harry was taken aback, whatever he was expecting it certainly wasn't that.

"Er... right? Thanks, I guess." He said rubbing the back of his head nervously.

Ron was undeterred, "Harry, I know I did wrong, I can't fix that. What I can do is fulfil my pledge to you. Now it's up to you, can you trust me?"

Sighing audibly, Harry ran through his options. An inordinate amount of time elapsed and finally, when Ron felt that if he didn't get a response he would spontaneously combust, Harry responded, "I guess I can try to trust you again."

He walked towards Ron and stood in front of him, holding his hand out, "Hi, I'm Harry Potter."

Ron smiled and Harry smiled as well, he firmly grasped Harry's hand in his own, "Ron Weasley, say, do you have the, you know," he then mock-whispered, "scar?"

Harry laughed and let go of Ron's hand; he sat down beside him and pulled up his fringe, completing the remake of their first meeting.

"Wicked!" Ron said with faked enthusiasm.

The two teens then burst out laughing.

Ron smiled faintly at the memory – it was a good day. He had pledged his honour to Harry and Merlin be damned if he wouldn't stand by his friend, even if he disappeared. Ron slapped his forehead as everything became so clear, the reason behind his brooding evaporated entirely.

Conflicting emotions had raged in Ron's mind for months, but now, the answer was clear as day. He couldn't blame Harry for making a decision for himself. It was his life and he could choose to live it as he pleased. What Ron would do, was live by his promises. He had pledged allegiance; he named Harry his brother in all but blood. Weasleys never deserted family and that was what Harry was to him, family.

"Hey Hermione," Ron said turning to her.

Her eyes flashed to attention, this was the first time he had struck a conversation with her since the letters' incident.

"Yes Ron?"

"You don't think Harry will be back soon, do you?" Ron asked hopefully.

Hermione face contorted with pain, her eyes averted his gaze saying, "I don't think he will Ron, b-but I hope so."

Ron nodded, expecting the answer though not happy with it, "Well, where does that leave us?"

Hermione looked confused, "I don't know what you mean? What does his running away have to do with us?"

Ron looked at her with surprise, "Hermione, he's our best friend."

Hermione hastily nodded to show her consent, "I know that Ron, but what do you propose we do? Run away to search for him? We both spoke to Dumbledore and he said that he was doing everything in his might to find him and bring him home. If we interceded, we might just make things worse."

Ron pursed his lips, "Then we should just sit around and wait?"

Hermione shook her head in the negative, "I want to help him too Ron, he is my friend as much as he is yours, but there has to be a better way than disappearing on a wild niffler hunt."

Ron sighed, rubbing his forehead tiredly, "Well, what do we say to the others? They've been cornering us since we got back and it's only the first night. Pretty soon the whole school is going to wonder where Harry is and we're the ones they're going to rush to for answers. What should we tell them?"

Hermione bit her lower lip as she thought, when deciding on an answer she nodded to herself first and then turned towards Ron, "We tell them the truth."

"And what exactly is the truth?" Ron retorted.

Hermione's nose scrunched in distaste, but she answered nonetheless, "That he left Britain."

"Merlin's bloody ball sac! He ran away!" came an incredulous voice from the left of where Ron and Hermione were sitting.

The two friends turned their heads sharply and found the rude eavesdropper eyeing them with wide, disbelieving eyes, "He really upped and left?"

Hermione sighed, "Yes Dean, that's what happened, although I wouldn't put it so crassly."

"Then how would you put it?" Seamus butted in loudly; by now they had the undivided attention of everyone in the Common Room, "the little blighter's the reason me Mam' ain't allowin' me to come ta Hogwarts 'n' he just disappeared? Guess The Prophet was right 'bout him."

Ron stood up, his fists clenched, he looked at Seamus ferociously and everyone slowly edged away from the two wizards, "I'd like to see you do any better."

"What're you sayin'?" Seamus said loudly taking a challenging step forwards.

"I'm saying that it's easy to yap about things you know nothing about, quite another to actually defend something you believe in." Ron said, bringing his wand to the forefront but not pointing it yet.

A burly sixth year came and stood beside Seamus pompously, his arms crossed in a position of leisure, "Oh please, like you actually believe the drivel that Potter and Dumbledore are feeding us?" He said derisively.

"Its. Not. LIES!" Ron ground out angrily.

Three wands emerged: Ron's, Seamus' and Cormac McLaggen's.

"That's enough all of you!" Hermione intoned decisively, standing between the three altercating wizards, "Seamus, Cormac, I assure you that the 'drivel' we're being fed is actually true, Ron, you're a prefect now, you have to be above such petty fights."

Ron grunted in a non-committing manner and stowed his wand, turning away and facing the concerned and burning faces of the twins and Ginny. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying valiantly to bring his wayward temper under control.

"Not so different from his coward mate, now is he? Walking away from the mess he starts." Cormac said in a loud whisper.

His eyes snapped open, before he could help himself; a curse was on his lips, his wand in hand and McLaggen lay petrified at his feet.

Hermione and Seamus were flabbergasted, the twins and Ginny smiled genially and the rest just stared with jaw-dropping shock.

A moment of silence passed where no one knew how to respond...

...Then all hell broke loose.

"Stupefy!"

"Expelliarmus!"

"Rictumsempra!"

"Petrificus Totalus!"

"Tellentegra!"

"Asiovera!"

"Temporus!"

Spell fire raged from all directions.

Ron duck, twisted, swerved and jumped every few seconds, it seemed he was the eye of the storm. Turning around he saw Ginny and the twins courageously hex a few of his would-be assaulters. A scream from his left alerted Ron that the famous bat-bogey hex had been unveiled.

A leg-locker caught him and Ron toppled over, he looked back wildly and faced the infuriated expression of McLaggen, who wasn't so petrified anymore. Go figure.

"S-Stupefy!" A red beam of light engulfed its victim and Ron had his eyes closed, as he didn't want to witness his defeat at the hands of the pretentious prick. Still not feeling the blackness of unconsciousness, he hesitantly opened his eyes to see the battle continuing all around him and McLaggen lying stunned on the plush red carpet now marred by scorch marks rendered from wayward spells. He looked up to see the outstretched wand and supporting face of Neville Longbottom.

Who knew he had it in him?

"STOP THIS NONSENSE NOW!" Hermione's voice rang in the cramped Common Room turned battlefield like a banshee, the effect of a sonorous. She stood atop the only surviving study table making her announcement.

"CEASE AND DESIST!" She tried again and several of the Gryffindors turned to her, looking for direction.

Ron looked at the First-Years who no longer looked excited, but terrified and clutching each other as they huddled in one corner of the room, several of their fellow year-mates, either stunned or petrified around them.

His eyes then trained upon Seamus who was looking at Hermione maniacally as she was issuing instructions to clean up the mess and go on like nothing happened.

That slimy git!

Ron got to his feet and ran to her at full speed. As Seamus' red stunner was uttered, Hermione turned in his direction with horror plastered over her face as Ron jumped and knocked her out of the way, hastily erecting a Protego shield and deflecting his charm in the nick of time.

"What's the matter Finnegan? Don't have the guts to fight face-to-face? Or is it that you know Hermione could wipe the floor with you with her eyes closed?" He growled out angrily.

Seamus looked ready to attack again and Ron had dropped his shield to counter-attack, the fighting restarted around them as Dean shot a spell at Fred (or George?) and stunned him.

"Drowsimo!"

Seamus crumpled to the ground, breathing deeply. Ron turned to Seamus' attacker in surprise and found Hermione panting with her wand-tip glowing blue, her skin was turning red with anger and sheer exertion and the tremble of her hand was barely perceptible.

In the following minutes, a few more students fell. Three of the older students, who weren't drawn into the fight at all, gathered the first

and second years and ran up the Boys' Dormitory's staircase with the fearful students in tow. Ron was grateful; he was slightly guilty that a few of them had fallen prey to the attack that they had nothing to do with.

In short order, he fought his current opponent with ease, a seventh-year he didn't know by name but one who seemed to have the defence skills of a slug and the instincts of a sloth. He was aware of Hermione's rather one-sided duel with Victoria Perkins, a sixth-year, from the corner of his eye.

Nobody saw the Portrait Hole open and admit someone; understandably, they were otherwise occupied. However, all fighting ceased when the voice that scared students more than even Voldemort would in their nightmares, shouted like never before.

"WHAT IN MERLIN'S NAME IS GOING ON HERE!" Bellowed the rather putout Minerva McGonagall, Gryffindor House Head, Deputy Headmistress and Transfiguration Professor.

"Well Professor," the conscious Weasley twin commented innocently, "I believe it started as an argument and became a rather heated argument."

Ladies and Gentlemen, the understatement of the century! Unfortunately, it didn't seem to placate the Professor's ire; it only seemed to fuel it.

"Twenty points from Gryffindor for your needless tomfoolery Mr. Weasley! Is anyone injured?" She asked through clenched teeth.

Hermione and a few others, Ron noted that the 'others' were fellow Prefects who were trying to stop the fight, enervate-d or finite-d the stunned or petrified students respectively. Soon enough, everyone was back on their feet and facing each other with anger clear on their faces.

"Never in all my years!" McGonagall muttered under her breath, "The nerve of them!"

She turned to Hermione as the last student was revived; Hermione blushed under the accusing stare. Looking at the ground, she answered the previous question posed, "None of the students are

injured. All the first and second years were taken to the Boys' Dormitory when the fighting broke out; Xavier has gone to check on them. None of the students in the Common Room at present are in any serious danger, the most harmful spell throughout the battle was a stunner."

McGonagall's nostrils didn't seem to stop flaring one bit.

"Who," she ground out menacingly, "is responsible for all this?"

Without hesitating for a second, Ron emerged from the crowd, "I would be the instigator Professor. I had a disagreement with McLaggen and Finnegan, things deteriorated from there, but the other students chose to involve themselves on their own free will."

"Mr. Weasley?" She said incredulously, "a Prefect?"

Ron nodded but inside, his heart was pummelling in a way he never thought possible.

The leftover adrenaline from the battle and the dawning sense of horror at his actions were making him sick.

"Its true Professor," Seamus continued, "Weasley and I fought over the honour of a traitor and mad-hatter."

"He is not a traitor!" Ron said angrily and even Hermione's eyes narrowed in chilly anger.

"Will someone explain who is being referred to?" McGonagall asked exasperatedly.

"Harry Potter." Seamus and Ron said simultaneously.

Seamus spoke before Ron could, "As Weasley and Hermione had so aptly pointed out he ran away, throwing out the window any lingering honour he could have had, had he chosen to stay and fight for what he believed in, supposedly."

Ron and Seamus had wands pointed again and curses were on their lips.

"That's enough," McGonagall said summoning their wands and stepping between them.

"50 points from Gryffindor, each! This behaviour is disgusting! Never before have my lions behaved in such a shameful manner."

Both Seamus and Ron had the decency to look abashed at the last comment.

"Mr. Weasley, I'll also be reclaiming your Prefect badge, you clearly do not deserve it." McGonagall added as an afterthought.

Ron just shrugged, he unpinned his badge and gladly handed it over, it was too much work as it was.

"Mr. Longbottom, seeing as Mr. Potter is no longer with us and Mr. Weasley has proven himself inept beyond measure, the honour of Gryffindor Prefect falls upon you." McGonagall said tiredly.

A few Gryffindors moved aside to allow him passage, Neville timidly walked up to McGonagall and accepted the badge. He stared at it with a dreamy expression then shook his head and dispelled his fantasies.

What followed next shocked them all, "As f-f-flattered as I am Professor," Neville squeaked, "I'm going to have to respectfully decline the position."

McGonagall did not take the badge back from him she just eyed him warily. She had staged the passing on of the Prefect badge so publicly in order to make a spectacle out of Weasley, but this she clearly had not anticipated.

"For what reason Mr. Longbottom?"

Taking a deep breath, Neville screwed his face into one of excess concentration, as if choosing his words with great care and caution, "Today, Ron was conflicted because his duty as a Prefect raged against his duty to his mate. He ultimately chose his mate. I know Harry, and I believe in Harry, if the same situation arises again, I won't hesitate in standing by Ron. So, I cannot accept this."

Pursing her lips, McGonagall sighed, should she be banging her head on the nearby wall, or applauding their loyalty?

"Everyone involved in this fight will have detention for the next month with me, you know who you are so don't try and weasel your way out of it or I will be forced to catch you personally and you would do well to not rouse my anger further. Gryffindor House, since the founding of the school has never been in negative points even before the start of Term. Thirty points from every student involved in the fight. I hereby suspend the Quidditch Team; we will not be participating this year. I see our Quidditch Captain Ms. Johnson was also involved in this, kindly hand in your badge Ms. Johnson." McGonagall finished what she had to say amidst the loud sounds of disagreement and outrage from the rest of the House.

"I have all your names recorded," McGonagall continued, "Tomorrow morning, before breakfast, you will all report in the Headmaster's Office because trust me when I say this, your abysmal lack of decorum today will have serious consequences."

Without another word spoken, McGonagall charged out of the Portrait Hole.

The students looked at each other guiltily, McGonagall was right, a punishment of this magnitude had never been levelled on any House ever before.

"This is all once again," Seamus began, "Potter's fault. We fought because of him and in his name."

Surprisingly enough, before Ron could respond, Hermione answered him in a loud growl, "That's enough Seamus! Gryffindor House has been humiliated today because of you and Ron! Tomorrow the whole school will know. We're going to be the laughing stocks for the rest of the year. You say this is because of Harry, I say grow up and look at who was holding the wand! You raised your wand, you uttered the spells and you caused the damage! Not Harry!"

Seamus bristled under the reprimand but before he could say something potentially precarious to the already-volatile situation, Ron intervened, for once thinking from his head and not his arse, "I stand in Harry Potter's name. He is my brother in all but blood. I will

rise to defend him, but this is the last time I come to wands' end against my own House."

To his astonishment, Neville came and stood beside him, clapping him on the back, "Me too."

Hermione, Fred, George, Ginny, Angelina, Katie, Alicia, the Creevey brothers and three other Gryffindors followed Neville's example. Around twenty others including the flushed red Cormac McLaggen, Dean Thomas and Lavender Brown congregated around Seamus.

The groups faced each other off as the stragglers who hadn't picked a side hastily backed away.

Many strange events occurred in Gryffindor House that night: Enemies surfaced from hitherto unknown crevices, the schoolyard bully's victim grew a backbone, the bookworm lashed out against the rules and the eclipsed sidekick emerged as a leader.

Yet the strangest occurrence of them all was the source of all the tension and change, a source that was notably absent. Harry Potter was a natural leader; he inspired loyalty and breathed courage in those around him without even realizing it.

The lines had been drawn.

The House of Lions was divided...

...And the term had only just begun.

BOY-WHO-LIVED DISAPPEARS

By Henrietta Taperman

Headmaster Albus Dumbledore revealed shocking news during the last meeting before the start-of-term at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Notable members of Hogwarts Board of Governors, including prominent spokesperson and philanthropist, Lucius Malfoy, raised concerns regarding the mental stability of Britain's own Boy-Who-Lived and whether he was capable of continuing his schooling without any further harm inflicted on fellow students.

"My own son was declared an arch-nemesis by Mr. Potter for simply extending a hand of friendship," Mr. Malfoy pointed out, "It makes me wonder what the poor boy has gone through to despise and be wary of those around him who want nothing but the best for him."

Yet the icing on the cake came when Headmaster Dumbledore announced that Harry Potter would not be attending Hogwarts School this academic year. Why, my dear readers may wonder, is this so? Well, this journalist has dug deep to reveal the truth in all its ugliness. The exact location of Harry Potter has not been disclosed, the Headmaster has been very tight-lipped about it. Conversely, the Board of Governors seem to think that maybe Dumbledore really hasn't lost all his marbles because he actually decided to keep a menace out, instead of inviting it back in.

Sources confirm that the reason Potter was unable to attending his disciplinary Hearing last August was because of a severe mental breakdown, however, Mr. Potter was never admitted to St. Mungo's for treatment. A very reliable Ministry official said, "[Mr. Potter] has cast a dark shadow over wizarding Britain with his incessant lies. Minister Fudge is doing all that he can to curb the poor child from doing further damage to himself and his fragile mental health. We hope that he makes a speedy recovery."

That, my dear readers, is all that is known of the Boy-Who-Lies as of this time. But fear not, your hardworking journalist plans to dig far and deep to uncover the truth and bring Potter's whereabouts to light.

For more information on the Board of Governors, see Page 7

For More information on Potter's disciplinary Hearing, see Page 3

For a St. Mungo's Mind Healer's expert opinion on Mr. Potter, see page 5

Remus balled up the newspaper distractedly and incinerated it with his wand. He wasn't even sure why he continued to read that damn paper anymore anyway.

Lying back in his chair, he closed his eyes and tried to block out the incessant shouting match between Molly and Arthur. Apparently, Ron had gotten into a huge fight on the first day back, Molly was

understandably outraged and Arthur was surprisingly supporting his son after hearing his reasons. Needless to say, the clash of opinions between the couple was loud and involved never-before heard screaming matches.

"How's the reading coming along?"

Remus turned to see that Tonks posed the question. She was entering the kitchen from the main door and pulled up a seat beside him. With a flick of her wand, she shut the door and applied a silencing charm on it; even then the muffled yells of the Weasleys could be heard.

"Ron really did it this time." Tonks commented in an off-hand manner.

Remus just nodded along with her, not really paying attention to her words.

"Hey," Tonks said softly, "I'm trained to read people and you're not the least bit interested in what I'm saying. What are you thinking about?"

Remus sighed and sat back in his chair, his shoulders slumped and his body deflated.

"I read The Prophet today, it wasn't very reassuring." Remus ground out tiredly, rubbing his eyes.

Tonks hummed but then her eyes widened slightly, "Oh right, the new article! That Taperman is a real piece of work. Word on the street is that Skeeter taught her everything she knows."

Remus snorted, "I could believe that. She's eerily adept at twisting things out of focus."

A companionable silence enveloped the two as they contemplated the recent development. In the background, they could hear Mount Molly erupting yet again on her poor husband who was far too unprepared to deal with his angry wife.

"Remus?" Tonks asked quietly.

"Yes?"

"Do you know where Harry is?" She asked neutrally

Silence.

"Why would you ask that?" Remus answered a question with a question evasively.

Tonks put her hand over Remus' shoulder and squeezed, "Because Molly is devastated and Dumbledore is worried and you look crushed every time you see them. Like you want to say something but can't.

Remus turned away from her, "I don't know where Harry is; I would have brought him back if I did."

Tonks placed her hands on his shoulders and drew him in, her lips barely a centimetre away from his ear, "Then why are you so defensive about it?"

Remus jerked out of her grasp and stood up, he turned to look at Tonks with eyes burning with silent anger.

"Firstly, I will not repeat myself when I say this, I don't know where Harry is. Secondly, Tonks, nothing can ever happen between us, I'm a werewolf and I will stay alone, also you're at least fifteen years younger than me."

Tonks looked away, a maddening blush on her cheeks and Remus stalked out of the room, banging the door petulantly behind him.

He proceeded to walk up the stairs and thoroughly ignoring the still ongoing fight between the elder Weasleys, he went into the library. Casting a similar silencing charm on the now-closed door of the library, Remus then erected a privacy bubble. A large, black dog appeared from under the reading table. The dog then transfigured itself into a shaggy-haired man with haunted cobalt eyes.

"What took you so long Moony?" Sirius said, taking a seat opposite him, a book clutched in his hand.

"I had to shake Tonks off, she's a surprisingly smart one, and I think she's onto us." Remus answered casually, placing his hands on the table and facing Sirius.

"Does she know?" Sirius asked cautiously.

"No, but she suspects and I don't know how long we'll be able to hide this from the Order." Remus insisted.

"We will hide it as long as it needs to be hidden." Sirius answered with finality, "Now, have you gathered the ingredients?"

Remus reached into one of the pockets in his long trench coat and produced a packet full of an odd assortment of ingredients.

"That's all that you asked for Padfoot," he said handing it over, "I tried finding someone for an added amount of mother-of-pearl, but it was not available anywhere."

Sirius nodded excitedly, "That's alright, I wasn't expecting you to find it anyway. The amount that's left in the Potions' Chamber downstairs should suffice for two failed tries at the least." Sirius then smiled sadly, "This would be so much easier if Lily or James were around, they were much better at potions."

Remus too had a forlorn look on his face, "Listen Paddy, we've failed them once and we've failed Harry now as well. Let's not make our chances at redemption trite."

Sirius' eyes were bright with unshed tears, "I know Moony, I know."

"How long will the potion take?" Remus asked brusquely, trying to divert his attention from depressing thoughts.

"A month-and-a-half, assuming I get the potion right at the first go. Allowing a margin for error, I would say at least two to three months." Sirius calculated.

"Do you think we have that much time? The kneazle might be out of the bag by then, like I said, the paperwork is filed at the Ministry. Either Kingsley or Tonks or even Dumbledore just has to look into your health files prior to your capture and everything will be out in the open." Remus remarked practically.

Sirius sighed and shrugged his shoulders, "We can only hope for the best Remus. All I know is that I will make sure that my godson is protected until the time is right. We both knew this was going to happen sooner or later."

Remus nodded, "I'll see you at dinner then, we can discuss things further next week and I can monitor your progress every few days in the meantime."

Sirius seemed satisfied with that.

The two men got up and Remus removed his privacy bubble and silencing charm.

Before the werewolf made his exit, Sirius called out with his hand on his heart, "maraud solvo quod maraud vox."

Remus' lips quirked in amusement and sad reminiscence because they used to say the phrase of the Marauders before undertaking any scheme, it was tradition.

"Maraud solvo quod maraud vox." He intoned with a hand on his heart.

Neither of the men noticed when a tiny extendable ear was retracted from underneath the door. The holder of the ear quickly turned around and bounded down the stairs.

Something was cooking; Remus knew something that he wasn't sharing and what was with the clandestine meeting with Sirius? What were those two old pranksters planning?

"Bollocks!" She cursed under her breath when she knocked over the troll-leg umbrella yet again.

"Easy Harry, gently stir the cauldron four times clockwise, grip it tightly with both hands and control your movements. Potions is an exact art, a single miscalculated step can render hours of brewing useless." Stefan instructed with a quiet authority while looking over his own cauldron.

Harry nodded in Stefan's direction and followed his orders diligently. It had only been a few days since the Amanta had left for Zagreb leaving him in the 'capable' hands of Cassandra the Vampire.

Harry shuddered at the mere thought of that... woman.

Another half hour later, Harry had added the last remaining ingredient into the cauldron (powdered root of asphodel).

"Done." He said happily.

Stefan lowered the temperature under his cauldron and stepped over to Harry. He looked over the potion with a critical eye and nodded his acceptance, "This is better Harry, you have improved by leaps and bounds in a matter of a few days, but I would still not stock this potion."

"Why is that?" Harry asked casually as he washed his hands in the nearby basin.

"It is mediocre, it does not offer any edge over any other Draught of Living Death. A Potions' Master gains his mastery when he can infuse any standard brew with a novelty of his own, thereby, making himself noteworthy. That is the reason potions is called an art." Stefan lectured while walking back to his own cauldron.

Harry sighed; the last thing he needed was another stern reminder that 'magic was an art'. It seemed to be the Amanta's favourite line and no matter how much he tried, it always came back to haunt him.

"How have your lessons with the Amanta's assigned replacement been coming along?" Stefan asked absently.

Harry bit back the scathing remark about Cassandra that came to his lips. If he was being honest with himself, he had no idea how exactly his lessons had been coming along. Cassandra was an enigma of her own calibre just like the Amanta.

His mind drifted back to the memory of his first lesson.

Harry entered the Amanta's House as usual at the designated time. He removed his shoes and stood in the centre of the room, waiting.

"You look good enough to eat." Came a seductive purr.

Harry turned with his wand pointed, the hair on the back of his neck standing on edge.

She laughed her tinkling laugh and exposed her white teeth, her creamy neck and her tresses of brown hair bounced in waves. She was indeed beautiful, by all accounts, but even without knowing that she was a vampire, Harry would have spotted that there was something inhuman about her.

"Your paranoia is delicious Harry." She said a little huskily.

Harry took one cautious step back and hesitantly put his wand away, "So you've mentioned in the past."

She smiled and pointed to the coffee table near the sofa and chairs, there were several things lying there.

"Today we're going to start studying the modes of Human Transfiguration. One of the reasons the Amanta had me come in to train you was because she needed to ascertain whether you possessed an animagus form." Cassandra explained in a business-like manner.

Harry unwittingly smiled with excitement at the mention of 'animagus' training.

"Before we begin, I must ask, do you have any history of animagi in your family?"

Harry nodded genially, "My father had achieved his stag animagus in fifth year."

Cassandra nodded, "Good, that is a good sign, what about your mother?"

Harry thought back to his talks, however brief, with Sirius in the past year and with Remus before that, "I'm not sure; if she did have a form, she never achieved it."

Cassandra narrowed her eyes, "A muggle-born correct?"

All humour vanished from Harry's face, "Yes." He answered crisply.

Cassandra held up her hands in surrender, "I am not a blood purist Harry, in fact, I never discriminate on the basis of blood, I find all blood to be worthy." She said winking.

Harry had to physically restrain himself from cringing at the implied taunt at her vampirism.

She sighed at his response, "Really, you need to learn how to take a joke young man," she reprimanded lightly.

"The reason I asked was because Animagus ability tends to be hereditary. In fact, your form is generally the same as either one of your parents', or in your case, your father." She lectured with practiced ease, "the Amanta, despite being a Transfiguration Mistress in her own right, lost out in the gene pool as far as animagi are concerned. She called me in to help teach you the basics of transmutation."

Harry looked slightly confused.

"Sit down and I'll explain." She ordered and Harry complied.

"Transfiguration is an art of three categories: Transfiguration, Conjunction and Transmutation to be specific. Now there are many debates regarding the consideration of Conjunction and Transmutation to be elevated Transfiguration but we won't get into that yet. Transfiguration is the basics of magical manipulation; it is precise and difficult but the rudimentary basics of object-to-object sorcery. Conjunction is much harder because it involves creating the object itself, however it is still a branch of Transfiguration and is considered air-to-object sorcery. Lastly Transmutation is equally difficult, but different in its own right, it is self-applied Transfiguration where a sorcerer's body is so naturally attuned to change that they can assume various forms. This 'magical sensitivity' is rare, but not exceedingly rare, one in every four wizards possesses it in spades. That one tends to be a pureblood or halfblood in general because of their heritage. Are you following?"

Harry nodded, comprehending the various facts being hurled at him, "There is a reason that Masters of Transfiguration are often referred to as Sorcerers or Sorceresses, it is their trade and profession. I

believe your Headmaster Dumbledore himself is a Grand Sorcerer, meaning that he has been awarded the highest accolade one can receive in the art. Only one such accolade is awarded to a sorcerer every fifty years."

Again Harry nodded, his respect for Dumbledore rising tenfold.

"We will be focusing on animagi shifts because that is at the heart of Transmutation. Most probably, your form will be a stag like your father. Have you ever had an indication of being connected to your father's stag form?" She inquired.

"Um... My patronus takes on the form of a stag." Harry provided.

Cassandra smiled, "That is perfect! So in all probability, you will be a stag yourself."

Harry couldn't help the grin breakout on his lips, imagining himself as his father, prancing in the Forbidden Forest on a full-moon night.

"If you concentrate on mastering the basics, I gather you should have your form mastered by the commencement of the New Year and then spend the rest of the following year, growing into it and establishing a long-lasting connection to it." She explained.

"Great, let's begin!" Harry said enthusiastically getting up from his seat, "by the way, what's all this stuff for?" He indicated the assortment of items lying on the table.

"Oh, after your third attempt, you're going to be severely dehydrated, but you won't ask for water. After your fifth attempt, you're going to be slightly dizzy and I will be forcing that glass of water in your hands," she pointed to the water, "In two hours time, you will pass out and I will use that washcloth and water basin to dab your forehead until you wake up. When we're practicing Enchantment later in the afternoon, you're going to burn your left forearm so the Essence of Murtlap is to help soothe that and the pepper-up potion is to keep you on your feet when you go for your potions' lesson later in the evening with Master Yelizarov. By the way, he's going to spring a modified Sleeping Draught for your lesson, so you best be prepared." She finished with a big smile at his astounded expression.

"How do you—" He started.

"I just know things Harry, leave it at that, now shall we begin?" Cassandra said kindly, guiding him to the centre of the room.

Indeed, everything she said came true in the right order as well. Sybil Trelawney was a fraud and liar, most of the time, when it came to matters of the Inner Eye. But Cassandra Trelawney knew her divination with a frightening accuracy.

"Harry? Harry?"

"Huh?" Harry asked eloquently, ending his daydreaming.

Stefan sighed, "How have your lessons been coming along?"

Harry tilted his head as he contemplated that loaded question, "To be perfectly honest Stefan, I have no idea."

Stefan chuckled, not realizing that Harry was being absolutely serious.

Harry ran down the cobbled street at breakneck speed, passing by various shops and pedestrians who hurled insults at his retreating back. He was late and he knew that would mean trouble. Damn oversleeping!

Careening around the end of the road, the Amanta's house appeared and he jostled in, kicking his shoes off and entering the Main Foyer, panting for breath.

"You're late!" came an angry snap.

Harry's eyes rolled upward and they landed upon the upside down figure of Cassandra, hanging from the roof.

He gulped, "Err... I'm sorry."

Cassandra bared her fangs and in an instant, she jumped down and tackled Harry with inhuman strength to the floor, her hand clasped around his neck to strangle him, her face twisted into a sneer. He lay beneath her and struggled for air, he lunged for his wand but she slapped it away dismissively. She bent downwards as Harry was now choking due to the lack of air.

He gripped her hand in both of his and struggled to free himself, it was in vain because her grip only tightened.

"Let... me... go..." he forced out.

Something shined in her brilliant amber eyes and she immediately let go. Within a flash, she was on the other side of the room, crouched in an attacking position, her hands lowered to the ground gripping her wand and her eyes radiating an unearthly glow.

Harry lifted his head with one hand on his neck, massaging his aching skin and the other searching for his wand.

She appeared merely a metre away from him as he lay flat on the ground.

"What was... that for?" He wheezed.

Cassandra rose from the ground and stood with her back to the wall, her palms pressed against it; she looked like she was preventing her body from attacking him.

"You lied to me." She sneered at him.

"About what?" Harry asked askance.

She clenched her teeth, "You knew about me, about whom I was when we first met, why didn't you tell me?"

Harry bit his lower lip in worry, he had half a mind to continue the façade of not knowing what she was playing at, but his sense of self-preservation won out.

"I did not know you when we first met and that is the truth," she growled and he held up his hand to abate her, "But after you introduced yourself, I...uh...made a connection."

"With whom?" She was visibly shaking now.

"Wh-when I was studying at Hogwarts," Harry began trying to collect himself, "I had a Professor of Divination, her name was Sybil Trelawney."

Cassandra paled (which was truly a feat when considering her already pallid complexion) as he explained about Trelawney, batty in all her glory, he told her about his classes and how Trelawney predicted his death all the time. He also mentioned the real prophecy that was made during his third year examination and how it came to pass.

As his stories continued, Cassandra's knees gave out and she settled on the floor, breathing deeply, her eyes wide in astonishment.

"Are you sure?" She asked desperately, "Because if you are lying to me boy, I will kill you, there are ways around oaths."

"I'm not lying," Harry said offended, "I just figured you'll were probably related somehow, but didn't think much of it."

She was muttering under breath now, she got to her feet and began pacing back and forth as she processed his new information.

"Could it be possible? But definitely not? How could I have not known?"

"Er... Do you want me to leave?" Harry asked uncomfortably.

"What?" She asked breaking her reverie, "Uh... no... Tell me Harry, did her prophecy truly come to pass. No matter what you say about her being a fraud, did she incant a real prophecy?"

Harry nodded quickly.

"Dear Merlin," Cassandra said with a hand on her forehead and sank to the ground.

A few minutes passed and Harry was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with her silence, "Hey, are you okay?"

"No, I'm not," Cassandra said, she looked up to face him and had tear-stains running down her cheeks, well they were actually blood-stains, red lines marred her perfect, creamy skin.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Harry asked, wishing she would say no because he rather not get involved.

Cassandra sighed and sat back, her amber eyes distant, "I graduated from Hogwarts in 1878, and it was a different time for us then. The horror of the world wars and Grindelwald's bid for power and subsequently Voldemort's gamble had still to strike us. We were a self-contained and self-sufficient community."

"My father was a salesman, he managed a robes' store in Hogsmeade. He was not a good man," a look of distaste crossed her face when remembering her father, "He was a right bastard to be honest, ever greedy and willing to use any means necessary to get what he wanted. I was a Seer, the first to be born in the family in seven generations. So I was always given a little more importance than the others. When I graduated, I came back home intent to undertake an apprenticeship in Charms to become an Enchantress ultimately. He welcomed me with an arranged marriage to a man thirty years older, a man named Nicholas Trelawney."

Harry was horrified, "I'm so sorry to hear that."

She just shook her head in dismissal, "it was a long time ago. I followed with my father's wishes and married the man. I gathered that age was just a number after all, I could still be happy with him and we were magical, we would live long enough to make the number insignificant. More than anything else, Nicholas was charming and he swept me off my feet. I thought I could have had a future with him. How wrong was I? I was forcefully impregnated immediately after marriage, it was with morbid humour I learnt that the only reason Nicholas was so intent to marry me, was to get my blood, rich with the genes of a Seer into his family. Nicholas came from a long line of Seers and Prophets, but in his generation, none of the children had The Gift. Our first-born," she choked up, "was not gifted and Nicholas, Nicholas killed him in his rage."

Harry was astounded as the facts kept being unloaded. He distractedly wondered why was it that he was always left to deal with the crying women. With great difficulty, he placed a hand on Cassandra's back and managed a very awkward, "There, there."

"Soon after I met a Russian wizard-turned-vampire. He was intrigued by my ability and offered to change me. I hated Nicholas with a passion by then for what he did to my son. I complied and

changed, my first order of business was to kill my husband." She finished.

Harry stopped patting her back and made a strangled noise. Once again, he wondered what he had done to end up in these situations.

"Well obviously, your son survived and took up the family name and your great-granddaughter or probably, great-great-granddaughter lives to this day." Harry reassured quietly.

An awkward moment passed between the two where neither knew what to say.

"Harry, I think you should come back in the evening and we'll start with some more training then." Cassandra said dabbing her eyes.

Harry was quick to please as far as that was concerned. With nary a thought, he put on his shoes and exited her house. Standing outside with his unopened bag slung over his shoulder, Harry sighed in relief: that was close.

He walked along the cobbled lanes of the Magical Street of Romania in a daze. He had no idea where he was headed, but he had enough sense of self-preservation not to head down one of the darker alleys. His experience with those places had been bad on all accounts.

Tiredly, he stopped and leaned against the back wall of a shop, his eyes facing upwards. He then looked left and right and took in his surroundings. It was an interesting area, various shops lined the lane he was in but not many people were about. Understandable, it was still very early in the morning and only the Amanta (and subsequently Cassandra) would expect him to start his lessons at such an ungodly hour.

A door opened a few stores down and Harry's eyes were inadvertently drawn towards the action that broke the static equilibrium of his pause.

A young woman stepped out of the store, she was in nondescript navy blue robes, her light brown hair was tied up in a messy bun and a few stray strands fell across her face. Although she looked very ordinary, her most distinctive features were her wide, doe-like

light blue eyes. She seemed familiar for some reason. Where had he seen her before?

Her eyes fell upon him as he rested against the wall. She narrowed her eyes to get a good look at him, then suddenly, they widened in recognition. She bounded towards him, her robes flailing about her.

She stopped and stood in front of him, panting for breath and Harry had merely quirked an eyebrow in confusion, he still couldn't place her.

"James?" She asked hesitantly.

Realization dawned; it was Sonia, the barmaid!

"Sonia, how are you? I haven't seen you since the bar incident." He said lightly.

She giggled, "That was truly eventful. I never got to thank you for that James, however, the bar was utterly decimated, and it took a week to restore it to its 'former glory'. Also I lost my job there."

Harry's neutral expression faded into one of guilt, "I'm sorry you lost your job, I didn't mean for that to happen."

She scoffed, "Think nothing of it, I was going to quit as it is, being groped every night was not exactly the job I had signed up for."

Harry shrugged, not knowing what to say.

"So anyway," Sonia continued, suddenly feeling shy, "I just took up a waitress' job at Maria's Café, I'm much happier there."

"That's good." Harry said genuinely happy for her.

"Yeah..." She said.

A long, agonizing, awkward moment passed between the two, as neither knew what to say.

"So... um, it was great to see you." Sonia ground out disappointedly.

"Hey, um... Where did you say you're working now?" Harry asked nervously.

She immediately brightened, "Maria's Café."

"Well, I was wondering," he scratched the back of his neck awkwardly, "if, after you get off from work tomorrow, you would like to, maybe, go have dinner somewhere on the Street or Muggle Romania,"

Sonia gave him a dazzling smile, "I would love to. I get off from work at six tomorrow."

Harry nodded, unable to keep the blush from rising to his cheeks.

Sonia too was bushing and she turned around with a muffled 'see you then' and skipped away.

Once she turned the corner, Harry couldn't help the big grin that threatened to break out of his face. He couldn't believe it, his first date!

He walked away from the lane and headed towards Stefan's, deciding to ask to have his lesson rescheduled to the late morning and afternoon instead of the evening, since he still had to go to meet Cassandra for his overdue lesson. An outside observer could easily notice the visible bounce in his step from then on.

It was with heavy trepidation that Harry retraced his steps to the Amanta's House after his Potions' lesson ended at five o'clock. He had decided to stall as long as he could and had eaten a hearty dinner, making his way there at a sluggish pace.

By seven o'clock, he could no longer put it off and was turning the corner to the Amanta's House with a sense of resignation. He opened the door, took off his shoes and entered the Main Foyer. His wand was held protectively in a strong grasp in his hand and his instincts were on fire, his eyes darting from dark crevices to the ceiling for any sign of the over-emotional vampire.

"Good evening Harry," Came Cassandra's seductive greeting. Honestly, only this woman could make a simple greeting ooze with lust.

"Cassandra," he said politely, inclining his head.

He was a little confused because she had changed the layout of the Foyer. Gone were the comfortable sofas and tables, it was just a big, empty room now, with a circle of unlit candles in the centre. There were only dim lights lighting up the room.

Cassandra emerged fully from the shadow she was standing in, allowing herself to be seen clearly under the dim lights.

Harry's eyes widened into saucers, she was wearing a different robe, and it was red, but very tiny and sheer. It stuck to her like a second skin, emphasizing her slim waist, creamy skin, ample bosom and bright amber eyes. She had let her hair down for the occasion, the subtle brown nuances of her hair that were easily visible in the daylight were lost under the dim lights, it appeared long, flowing and midnight black, like the first night he met her.

"Today, we are going to start with Divination. I know that my progeny has not set a good example in front of you regarding the usefulness of the Inner Eye. But let me tell you that Divination is quite an extensive subject. Not having an extreme Gift of Sight does not mean that you have no inclination to the Inner Eye." She lectured.

Under normal circumstances, Harry would have groaned. Divination was bollocks, even Hermione, lover of all things academic had walked out of that class and McGonagall, ever fair McGonagall sneered at the mere mention of Trelawney's predictions. But maybe, it would be different under the tutelage of a real Seer and not a fraud with her moments of 'Sight' like Trelawney.

"Divination is a personal branch of magic, it is surprisingly methodical in the beginning, but it becomes more and more abstract the deeper you delve in its lore. Divination is considered the most impractical branch of magic because no amount of hard work or sheer will can help you divine anything unless you possess at least a small modicum of talent."

She walked around the room as she spoke. Distantly, Harry listened to her, but his eyes were still glued to her form.

"Stand in the middle of the circle Harry." She instructed and Harry complied.

"You do possess some Divining talent Harry, it is within you, but you are unaware of its full potential at your current level." She explained.

"So what should I do?" Harry asked despite his strong beliefs on the subject.

"I want you to clear your mind, the Inner Eye is imbedded in your subconscious mind, unless it feels that your mind is protected from intrusion, it will hesitate to interact with your conscious mind. The technique I will be teaching you is called Occlumency. It was part of the old ways, to teach Occlumency to children willing to study Divination, however, it has fallen into disuse these days." She finished with a shake of her head.

"So I have to clear my mind?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"I will guide you in the beginning Harry." She assured him, "Sit down, good, now close your eyes, I will be speaking to you while you concentrate. I want you to think deeply and carefully."

Harry nodded slightly. He was sitting in the middle of the circle of candles; his legs crossed in Indian style and as per Cassandra's further instructions, his hands lay on his knees in a restful, yet alert manner.

"Alright Harry, I want you to concentrate on a spell, the Incendio charm. I want you to think deeply on that spell, imagine it at its finest, remember the cool flow of energy from your wand as you unleash the fire of the spell. Feel the words being spoken, the heat of the flames when they strike a wooden target, the burning incense, the ultimate fire and heat. Wrap your thoughts, feelings, emotions, situations, everything in the Incendio Charm."

Harry did as he was instructed. He thought of Incendio, he remembered when he was taught that charm in Charms' Class with Professor Flitwick in his first year. He felt his frustration at not mastering the charm immediately unlike Hermione. He remembered when Hermione grasped his shaking hand in her own and placed her other hand on his shoulder; she directed his movements and wand-motion until he knew it perfectly. He felt the heat rising to his

cheeks when the fire emerged from his wand and Hermione clamped his shoulder in excitement, her eyes shining with pride when she looked at him.

He recalled the Devil's Snare and the heat that saved them from the attacking vines. He felt the heat of Incendio when he burnt the wall in the Amanta's Main Hall on his seventh attempt to overcome it.

This is stupid. A voice at the back of his head mocked.

Harry ignored it; he tuned out Cassandra's instructions and focussed solely on Incendio.

This isn't working.

Harry's face scrunched in annoyance, he would make it work no matter what.

Come on Harry, you know Divination is bollocks and this vampire-woman is battier than Trelawney, no use listening to her.

He was hard-pressed to disagree. His concentration wavered slightly and the voice suddenly had a face behind it. It was Hermione, her bushy hair just as he remembered it, her smile wide and inviting.

"I can help you Harry," Hermione said kindly, her body appearing out of nowhere from the black depths of the void around him, she began waling towards him.

They were in a large void, nothing but blackness everywhere, but he could see her clearly. She stood behind him, recreating the scene from his first-year. Her hand was on his wand-arm, her other hand placed lightly on his shoulder. Her small fingers, entwining with his own as she grasped his wand tightly.

Harry could feel her closeness, her unique scent, and her breath against his neck. She began helping him through the wand-motions; Harry was becoming more and more entranced. Her hand on his shoulder, travelled to his shoulder blades. Carefully, her hand slipped under his arm and settled on his chest. A sweet pressure developed there as Hermione stuck herself to his back. Harry's started sweating when he felt her breasts pressing against him.

"Say it with me Harry," she whispered silkily, "Incendio!"

"Inn-Incendio!" He said as Hermione glued herself to him.

He felt a sudden discomfort in his pants, as he hardened with her increased pressure.

"Again Harry," she instructed, "Incendio!"

"Incendio!" He groaned as her hand moved from his chest, lower...

She was at his waist now and he felt the sweetest torture of his life. Her hand delved inside his robes as she whispered the incantation in his ear. Harry was panting now, as finally, her hand easily unzipped his trousers and ventured in, caressing his manhood.

"Say it Harry, Incendio!"

"Incendio-ooo!" He moaned loudly as Hermione gripped his length tightly, creating the most pleasurable pressure that Harry had ever felt.

"Harry, open your eyes! Harry! Harry!"

Two hands gripped his shoulders and shook him gingerly. He blinked once, he blinked twice and his eyes flew open to stare right into Cassandra's red-robed bosom.

Seeing him awake, if a little shaken, Cassandra stepped back outside of the circle, an amused smile on her face.

Harry looked around him and saw that the room was considerably brighter. All around him the unlit candles now possessed, large, dancing flames. He looked down to his own trousers and knew, inexorably that he was tented in the most embarrassing of ways.

"That was a good attempt Harry," Cassandra drawled, stalking the circle he was in. "But you seemed distracted while concentrating."

"I...uh...well..." Harry mumbled.

In an instant, Cassandra was beside him. Harry flinched as he felt her lips against his ear.

"Were you thinking of me?" She whispered.

Her hands appeared on his chest as she began kissing his neck, "Tell me Harry."

Harry felt like he was in a hazy world, "No...um...It was, Hermione."

Cassandra stopped her ministrations and looked at him oddly, lust replaced by curiosity.

"Who is this Hermione?" She asked neutrally.

"A friend." He breathed out.

Cassandra left his side and stood in front of him, outside the circle again.

"You lust after your friend Harry?" She asked.

Harry blushed involuntarily as he remembered his last vision of Hermione and her hand, gripping his...

"She's just a friend." He mumbled weakly, looking away.

"Harry, when practicing Occlumency, you are meant to empty your mind. However, an easier method of understanding the technique is to concentrate on a specific spell and a specific result, until the desired state of clarity can be reached with greater ease. All fire-based spells tend to have a lascivious effect on the Occlumens." She explained.

Harry had never been so embarrassed in his entire life.

"Then I believe I might... or I do... um." He was at a loss of words.

"Harry, look at me." She ordered sharply.

Harry raised his eyes and regarded her, she opened her robes slowly, pulling it back, she revealed her sheer negligee within.

Harry's brows shot to his hairline.

"Tell me Harry," she purred, "What are the three main characteristics of all vampires."

Dully, Harry's mind began working to his third year, when they covered Dark Creatures.

"The first is a defining characteristic from their human life." He said, his voice becoming dry as she let her robe pool at her ankles.

She stood in front of Harry in nothing but a netted vest and Harry could clearly see the outlines of her breasts and pink nipples. She wore long panty-hoes that stretched up to the end of her thighs, but her crotch was uncovered and bare.

"The se-second is bloodlust." He said in a strained voice.

She walked towards him and crouched down. She hummed to herself as she took his lifeless hand and placed it on her crotch, it was dripping. Harry moaned involuntarily as she placed her lips against his neck and licked.

"And the third Harry?" He huskily asked.

"S-S-Sex."

She growled in an animalistic manner and brutally kissed him, her lips smacking against his, her tongue exploring his mouth, as he barely held his own. Before he realized it, Cassandra had waved her wand and divested him of his clothing. His erect member now stood proudly in view of the world. She pushed herself forward and her warmth came in contact with his member.

Cassandra moved her lips to his ear and licked slowly, her hand gripping his length in a light pressure and moving in a steady rhythm up and down. She pushed lightly against his chest with her free and made him lie down.

Straddling his waist, Cassandra mounted his length and in one sweep, sheathed it in herself.

Harry moaned as he felt her surround him. She began moving, picking up a comfortable rhythm and Harry held onto her waist, while thrusting upwards.

She was panting as she moved; she neared his neck and whispered in a breathy voice, "Let me have a taste Harry."

Harry moaned his ascent.

Without further preamble, she buried her fangs into his neck and sucked on his blood. Harry yelled as an unimaginable pleasure overtook him. He ejaculated powerfully as Cassandra continued to suck.

Black spots appeared in his line-of-sight and before he knew it, he was unconscious.

He groggily came to the world. He looked around and saw he was lying completely naked over velvety silk sheets. He sat up in bed and observed the room. It was slightly large for a single room, with a queen-size bed against one wall, a modest armoire on the other side and a large desk and comfortable chair near the door.

He got up and felt extremely conscious about his nudity. Pulling the blanket with him, he wrapped it around his lower section in an untidy bind and holding onto it tightly in one hand, he opened the door and looked out.

What he saw was the Main Foyer of the Amanta' House.

It all came back: the Occlumency, Hermione, Cassandra and...

His free hand reached up to his neck and he felt the scars of her fangs, though they felt partially healed. He shuddered in pleasure remembering the events of the night before. Guilt overcame when he remembered how he thought of Hermione. He was so confused. Why would he think of Hermione like that? It had never happened before.

"I see you're awake."

Harry turned around and blushed violently when he saw Cassandra standing against the wall behind him, thankfully tastefully dressed in one of her ordinary robes.

"Well, the shower is down the Hall, be ready in fifteen minutes, we have to catch up on your transmutation and enchantment exercises, I want you to build a metal defence today and make considerable progress with regards to your animagus transformation that has been surprisingly stunted." She snapped.

Harry nodded and ran down the Hall still holding the blanket around him.

If he thought that being around Cassandra was unnerving before, it was downright intimidating now!

Author Notes:

1. Ron appears more than a little OOC in this chapter and I know that. It's because I have an important role for him to play and he needs to grow up faster in order to fulfil that role. Just take a leap of faith and imagine how you would respond if one of your closest friends who was under a murderer's threat, suddenly disappeared. It would be at least a little difficult to wrap your head around. For all you Ron-haters/bashers out there, don't hate me, but Ron is good here. Although I guarantee you that he and Harry will be at odds when the time comes for a variety of reasons.

2. There is going to be a far-reaching effect of the division of Gryffindor House that you will see in future chapters.

3. Sirius and Remus are cooking something, all I will say is that it is related to finding Harry (obviously) and I dare all of you to guess what its about and to what effect. Leave a review of any possible thoughts you may have, but its my little side-plot, probably in another three-four chapters it will be out in the open, but for now, keep guessing.

4. "Maraud solvo quod maraud vox" is a latin translation of "Maraud freely and maraud right". I just figured it would be nice if they had something more formal than "I solemnly swear I am up to no good".

5. Harry will never be a Potions' Master, he sucks at Potions and that will not change. But he will get better only for the reason that it is a helpful subject.

6. The explanations on Transfiguration and Divination in this chapter are all AU ideas.

7. I originally posted Stefan's surname as Yelizerova because that was the surname of a close Russian friend of mine. However, a very helpful reviewer from Russia pointed out that women's surnames generally end in 'A' and because Stefan is a man, his last name should be Yelizerov or Yelizarov. So I changed it to be more culturally appropriate. Big thanks to STEDIM for informing me about that. I have no Russian or Romanian background and whatever I post is from hearsay, the internet, my Russian friends and my all too brief vacations to St. Petersburg, Moscow and Busharest. So if you are from that culture and you do spot some shoddy inconsistencies like Stedim did, PM me or leave it in a review and I'll make sure I change it.

8. Cassandra Trelawney's past is an AU idea.

9. The smut scene wasn't something I put in randomly, it has a purpose which will be revealed in due time.

I have some BIG news! I'll be leaving for London tomorrow, my Visa finally came through and I'm going to study at Uni over there. Consequently, this is going to affect my update pace. Previously, I made it a point to post a new chapter every 10 days, now its going to slow down dramatically. Like a new chapter every month, maybe two chapters a month if you're lucky. However, seeing as this is not fair to my readers, I will make sure that whenever a chapter does come up, it is exceptionally long to make up for the long wait. My aim is to write a chapter that is 20k words long, which will probably be Chapter 6 that I will finish sometime in the last week of October.

Any direction, suggestion or commentary is thoroughly appreciated. If you have any plot ideas on how you wish to see Ron's character develop, Hermione's future role, why she came in Harry's vision, why did Harry have sex with Cassandra, etc. Pose it as a review or PM me and I will get back to you with some explanation if not a complete explanation because I do not want to ruin the plot.

If you spot any grammatical errors and/or inconsistencies, PM me or leave it in a review and I'll change it asap.

Once again, REVIEWS make me HAPPY! So please help me find a reason to smile!

Next chapter: Umbridge strikes, the new DA, Voldemort schemes, Sirius and Remus continue to plot, Harry goes on his first 'date' (which will prove interesting), a practice duel with Cassandra using Enchantment, progress in Divination and Animagus training and the Amanta comes back!

Cheers!

~ Gatonio.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CLIMB

There's always going to be another mountain,
I'm always gonna wanna make it move,
Always gonna be an uphill battle,
Sometimes I'm gonna have to lose,
Ain't about how fast I get there,
Ain't about what's waiting on the other side,
It's the Climb.

The Climb ~ Miley Cyrus

Rows upon rows of seats, a clean chalkboard at the front, not a chair out of place, not a speck out of its spot. Everything was in order – it surprised her.

She let the door creak open and entered, Ron and the others behind her. She carefully made her way to the second row and was about to sit down, but a small paper swan settled down in front of it. She turned around, her brow creased in question to face the smug look on Lavender's face.

"Sorry Granger, that place is taken." She said contemptuously and walked forward, brushing past her and Ron. She sat down with a flourish.

Ron bristled beside her, but she placed her hand on his wrist commandingly and he complied. The two then moved to the other bench and took their seats, soon to be joined by Neville.

The class was now seated, Gryffindors occupying the second and third rows and Slytherins everywhere else.

"Hey Weasley, how does it feel to be hated by your fellow Gryffindorks?" Came a slighting comment in a silky drawl.

Ron turned with a sneer and regarded the owner of the voice.

"Listen here Malfoy—"

She clamped down on his arm again; there was no need for more discord.

Ron took a deep breath and turned back around, ignoring Malfoy altogether.

"Granger got you on a tight leash I see." He goaded on and the Slytherins and several Gryffindors snickered.

Hermione tensed, she didn't know why, but she had been on edge this morning. She turned around and faced Malfoy with anger.

"That's funny ferret, good thing I'm taking lessons from Parkinson, although I doubt I'll ever reach her level of proficiency." She shot back.

Malfoy's laughter vanished and he sneered, more snickers followed her pronouncement.

"10 points from Gryffindor for insulting a fellow student Ms. Granger." Came a squeaky voice from the front of the room.

Hermione turned to see Dolores Umbridge in all her glory, descend the staircase from her office into the classroom.

"But Professor, Malfoy started it." Ron protested weakly and Hermione closed her eyes and counted to ten; he just made things worse.

"Tsk ts Mr. Weasley, lying about fellow classmates. I would take more points, but it seems that Gryffindor House can scarcely afford to lose more points." She said with a sweet smile.

Slytherin snickers filled the classroom and reverberated off the walls.

"Good morning class." She said smiling.

She received an uncoordinated response of 'good mornings'.

She placed her hands on her hips, her good humour vanishing to be replaced with annoyance, "Now that won't do, won't do at all! When I say 'good morning class' you respond with 'good morning Professor Umbridge'. Now lets try that again, good morning class."

As one, the entire class responded, "Good morning Professor Umbridge."

Her smile was back in place, "Excellent."

Umbridge raised her wand and waved it in an unnecessary flourish. The chalk picked up from her desk and began writing on the board, "Ordinary Wizarding Level Examinations, or more commonly known as OWLs. This year you all will be tackling these examinations; I doubt I need to emphasize the importance of them."

She approached her chair and took a seat, her frame screaming sickly-sweet with her pink long-skirt, baby pink cardigan and blouse.

"Your instruction has been woefully lacking as I have come to learn due to past professors. It is unfortunate, but all is not lost yet." She said with a wide grin.

"Wands away and open your textbooks to chapter one."

Hermione was confused but complied nonetheless; she opened the book to the first chapter and placed the book neatly in front of her, her assessment of the new professor still underway.

"The Ministry has decided that Hogwarts needs help and so has come together to create a Ministry-approved curriculum in order to best enhance your performance for these exams." She said happily as if on a sugar-rush.

"Now I want all of you to read this chapter and take diligent notes for the rest of the class."

With muffled groans the class complied, Hermione's brow knitted in consternation.

She raised her hand and waited to be called upon. Umbridge looked at her raised hand and simply looked away. Hermione was now annoyed; she persisted, her hand steady in the air.

Five minutes past and she hadn't been called. Students were now openly looking at her and then at Umbridge, an uneasy tension building in the room.

Sighing dramatically, Umbridge turned to her and nodded, "Yes Ms. Granger?"

"Professor, I was wondering if there was going to be a practical portion of the class to use these spells." Hermione asked hopefully.

With bated breath the class waited and Umbridge... laughed.

"Using defensive spells? Whatever for my dear? The Ministry protects all of you." She said dismissively.

Hermione once again raised her hand and Umbridge nodded to her reluctantly.

"Professor, the OWL exams have a practical portion that constitutes half our grade, if we don't practice the spells, how will we fare in that part?" Hermione pointed out innocently and she saw Ron hiding a smirk beside her.

Umbridge's lips thinned into a straight line, "If you know the theory well enough, the practical portion will not be any trouble whatsoever."

Well that was a load of rubbish that she'd never expected to hear.

A few minutes passed and Hermione felt her anger rise, she raised her hand again. The ignoring competition restarted, finally Umbridge relented, "What is it now, Ms. Granger?"

"I've already read the first chapter Professor."

Umbridge's brow knitted in irritation, "Then read the next one."

"I already have." She replied neutrally.

"The third then." Umbridge was angry now.

"I've read the entire book." Hermione responded kindly.

Umbridge stood from her seat and walked towards her.

"Is that so?" She asked sweetly, "Well then, would you kindly tell me what Simester's fifth principle of curses is?"

Hermione smiled slyly, "The fifth principle states that all curses – whether fuelled by emotion or will – are slaves to the power of the wizard or witch casting it. Their breadth and effectiveness is dependent upon the innate magical ability of the magical."

Umbridge placed her hands on the table and looked at Hermione, right in the eye, "I see, well, what do you think of Simester's views?"

Hermione thought briefly and answered with as good an academic response as she could, "Although the fifth principle makes sense, Simester's tone and take on how magical ability is determined on magical descent within families is troubling, his proposition seems biased and to an extent fuelled by his personal views."

"WRONG!" Umbridge said angrily, slamming her hands on the table and causing both Ron and Hermione to jump slightly.

"No matter how intelligent you may think you are Ms. Granger, you do not know more than Mr. Simester whose views have been adopted as the binding focus of modern defensive magical study by the Ministry." She said with a sneer.

She promptly turned around and walked towards her seat, satisfied with her response.

Hermione was angrier now than she had been in a long time.

"Excuse me Professor?"

Umbridge stopped in her tracks and turned around slowly, her smile seeming a little forced now.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but the Ministry has also adopted and incorporated the views of Tirentimon who pointed out that magic is

like a muscle that needs to be practiced and focused for maximum utility. They have also awarded Simmens with the Order of Minerva for his ground-breaking achievement in determining the extent of magical development within schooling years and his theory of defensive magic being an outgrowth of nimble practical work." She shot out with as much neutrality as she could muster.

Umbridge was now angry, her smile all but gone and her eyes blazing.

"Detention Ms. Granger for your terrible behaviour and conduct in my class." She said finally and turned away from the spluttering protests of Ron.

Alright, Hermione was now mightily upset. She could feel tears forming in her eyes but she held them back. Her assessment of the new defence professor was complete: a useless instructor and a complete and utter bitch!

She put pressure on Ron's shoulder and held him back; there was no arguing with this woman, she was a lost cause.

Hermione rubbed her hand rhythmically, her mind still in a whirl at what had just happened. A Professor had harmed her, had caused her physical pain and drawn blood from her as a punishment.

Here she thought her days couldn't get any worse.

She walked determinedly towards the one person she knew she could depend on no matter what. Pulling her hair to the side, she tried to mat down the bushy mess it had turned into as her stress mounted during her detention; her eyes were red and puffy with unwanted tears that had stained her parchment. Her cheeks were red and she looked broken. Something had to be done to stop that monster of a woman.

Knocking softly on the wooden door she waited, she would do something.

"Enter," Came a stern response.

Hermione balanced her book bag on her shoulder and used her good hand to open the door. There was an audible creak as it opened and she headed inside. The room was large, ornate on all accounts and similar to all others of Hogwarts' classrooms. There were several portraits adorning the walls, of famous Sorcerers and Sorceresses who had bent, broken and recreated magic.

Sitting behind her imposing desk sat the woman that Hermione was determined to emulate, the woman whom she considered her mentor beyond anyone else.

"Professor McGonagall?" She choked at the words; she hadn't realized that she was still crying.

"Ms. Granger?" McGonagall asked with concern seeing the terrible shape of one of her favourite students.

Hermione walked forward and towards her professor, McGonagall stood up and ushered her to a seat, which she gratefully took.

"What happened?" McGonagall asked unusually haggard.

"Professor Umbridge..." Hermione ground out, trying to see past her tears. She took a deep breath, reining in her emotions; this behaviour was unbecoming of a Gryffindor.

She raised her injured hand and presented it to her Head of House.

McGonagall examined her hand; she clasped it between her two wrinkled hands gingerly and discerned the marks carefully.

In a very measured tone, McGonagall asked calmly, "Did Dolores do this to you?"

Hermione nodded emphatically, "She used a blood quill."

McGonagall hissed, a list of vulgarities were uttered and Hermione was slightly taken-aback by her response.

"That... that woman! Such medieval practices!" McGonagall stood up and Hermione copied her.

"Come with me Ms. Granger, I will speak to Dolores about this right now!"

It was a blur as Hermione meekly followed her Head of House, they passed through throngs of students who looked upon them with curiosity but had the good sense not to interrupt them. Although she was behind her, Hermione would rather not fathom what McGonagall's expression was like at that moment.

Entering the Defence classroom, McGonagall called out angrily, "Dolores! Get down here this instant!"

A few minutes past and Umbridge emerged from her office at the top of the stairs, "Minerva, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

McGonagall clamped onto Hermione's shoulder and gently steered her forward and realization dawned on Umbridge's face.

"How dare you use such medieval methods to issue detentions? Hogwarts has abolished such methods for centuries!" McGonagall nearly screamed, her anger was no longer in check.

Umbridge looked at Hermione with disdain, "Abolished Minerva? I think not, the use of blood quills has been a punishment technique for students since the founding of the school; they say Salazar himself created the first blood quill to correct an errant Slytherin. They have never been abolished, merely discouraged."

"Regardless Dolores, how dare you use such practices against a student!" McGonagall said walking towards the staircase threateningly, Hermione stood back and watched the scene unfold with mounting horror.

"Ms. Granger's conduct in my class was abysmal! Things at Hogwarts are worse than even I expected and matters need immediate redress, the first being the disorderly behaviour of students who should know better, especially one as her," Umbridge looked at her balefully, "who are supposed to be models to others, a prefect!"

McGonagall took one step back, "what do you mean?"

Umbridge stood in all her five-foot glory, "The Minister will hear of the seriously falling standards at Hogwarts, he will be most interested in sorting out this mess that Dumbledore has created and I will do everything in my power, using any means necessary to drive his point home."

McGonagall was speechless. What more could she say to something like that?

With as much dignity as she could muster, McGonagall left with Hermione in tow. Once outside the classroom, McGonagall was still fuming.

"Hermione, please apply some essence of murtlap on that cut, you can get it from Madame Pomfrey." McGonagall said in a quiet voice.

It finally hit Hermione that her mentor was powerless. Umbridge had an authority that superseded her and no one could do anything to stop this injustice. It was a humbling moment as Hermione looked at McGonagall for the first time with a less-than-respectful gaze – her mentor had failed her.

"You can't do anything to stop her, can you?" Hermione asked quietly.

McGonagall's eyes were blazing when she looked at Hermione, in a clipped tone she answered, "As much as it pains me Ms. Granger, I cannot, I have failed you."

The world tipped of its course as Hermione Granger realized for the first time that adults and professors couldn't solve all the problems, that she was alone and festering in injustice.

"I forgive you Professor, but I hope you will forgive me." She said in an almost unrecognizable voice.

"Whatever for?" McGonagall asked worriedly.

With slow movements, in order to not betray the visible tremble of her hands, Hermione's dainty fingers unlatched the pin to her shirt and removed her badge. She then handed the shiny red badge back to McGonagall.

"I cannot walk with this insignia knowing that it holds no value, but pretend that it does."

McGonagall looked crushed as she took back the badge, "Are you sure Ms. Granger?" Her voice sounded pained.

"Yes."

With measured steps Hermione walked back to the Common Room with her essence of murtlap. Madame Pomfrey was livid when she learned of what happened and Hermione left her to her own devices as she sought justice for this action, but Hermione knew better, nothing good could come of it.

It felt like just another day at Hogwarts, it felt like things were going to be fine because this was Hogwarts after all. Five years ago, Hermione had discovered she was a witch and a world of magic existed filled with wonders and surprises. She missed those days of innocence, when everything was much simpler, when the most dangerous thing she had ever encountered was the vicious spider in her closet.

In her time at Hogwarts Hermione had faced countless terrors and stood tall. Everyone always thought she should have been a Ravenclaw, the Hat thought it as well, but she knew she was a Gryffindor at heart, she knew she needed strength and courage above all else. She spent every waking moment since then proving it.

Every year, her innocence had been stripped from her, every year she'd see a facet of magic that horrified her and twisted the perfect world out of the shape that she had originally imagined.

Today she saw something that burnt the last bridge; today she lost faith in the magical world. No one was going to protect her, no one was going to stand up for her and actually win; she was on her own.

She gripped her wand tightly, "Lionheart."

The portrait hole swung open and Hermione stepped in. She saw people look at her and then turn away. Two bright blue eyes didn't waver. They swivelled to the hand she was hiding with the other and widened slightly.

"Hermione?" Ron asked with rising terror. "Are you okay?"

Hermione steeled herself; she could either unleash her anguish and be weak, or pick up the pieces and make the best of a bad situation. What would Harry do?

Her eyes fixed on a non-existent spot on the wall; she concentrated on the spot, as her mind was awl with possibilities, ideas churning left, right and centre in her mind. Memories of a simpler time assaulted her, reminded her, and tried to give her a message she no longer remembered.

"Hermione, do you have a moment?" A timid voice asked.

She sighed audibly and put aside her parchment and quill. She cleared the table she was working at that was covered with various leaflets and written notes as well as tomes from the library. When finished, she joined her hands and finally looked up to face him.

"Yes Harry?" She asked tiredly.

He looked torn, he was visibly shaking and his face was pale. He took a deep breath and looked around cautiously. Seeing everyone else in the Common Room engrossed in their work, he took a step towards her and sat down in front of her.

"Why Hermione?" He asked, his eyes downcast.

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously and her nostrils flared as she channelled her inner McGonagall.

"Harry, this isn't your fault, not in any shape, way or form. Someone put your name in the Goblet and I will make sure you get through this." She said determinedly.

He looked up surprised, his green eyes whirling with a slight moistness that never devolved to tears.

"Thanks, but... That's not what I meant." He whispered.

She placed her right hand under her chin and tapped the table with the other, her fingers making a staccato sound as she indicated him to elaborate.

He was hesitant, almost afraid.

"Harry, for Merlin's sake stop being elliptical and just tell me what's bothering you. You know I'm here for you." She said with concern.

His eyes snapped up and looked at her sharply, "That's what I don't understand Hermione, why are you here with me? Why haven't you deserted me? Why is it you can believe in me without question but... but he can't?"

Hermione was taken aback by the vehemence in his tone. Her expression softened when she felt the honesty in his words. He actually meant every word; he thought she would leave him.

"Silly boy," she said with a smile that caused him to frown and melted his serious expression, "You want me to believe that you circumvented Dumbledore's age-line? You have faced life-and-death situations every year and would willingly sign up for one more? Someone did this to you Harry, there's nothing we can do to change that, but what we can do is make sure you survive this unscathed, or with as little lasting damage as possible."

He was bewildered by her response, "Thanks... I think."

"Anytime, now since you're here, maybe you can help me research this charm for Flitwick?" She suggested innocently.

Harry groaned in defeat and she smiled, "Perfect."

They worked together in companionable silence for some time, the occasional scratching of the quill as they took notes on their respective parchments and the chatter of surrounding students in the Common Room made for the only sounds.

Ron passed by their table and sneered, she saw it from the corner of her eye and frowned, Harry stopped what he was doing looking completely blank.

She sighed, "Harry, give him some time, he'll come around."

He was crumpling the quill in his hands as he seethed, "Why is it that you can believe in me? Know I didn't do this? But he can't!" He reiterated his past grievance.

She forcefully took the quill from his fingers before he destroyed it completely, "Because Harry, I'm more mature than him, I know you and understand you. But you can't forget that he is still a good friend and when he gets his head out of his arse, he'll be back, just give him some time to get his head straight."

Harry looked away morosely, "Who says that I want him back as a friend if he comes back? I don't want to be with someone that deserts me when things get rough."

She grabbed his collar and forced him to turn around, "Look at me Harry," she commanded and he complied, "He is young, stupid, immature and completely wrong, I would be as angry as you are right now with him. But when and not if he comes back and apologizes, you should take him back."

She let go and turned back to her work. She wrote for a few minutes as he just stared at her and contemplated her words.

"Why should I take him back Hermione?" He asked truly curious.

She stopped and put down her quill, she looked at him with eyes gleaming with the magic of cool logic, "No matter how angry he is with you, for the silliest of reasons, if someone threw a killing curse at you tomorrow, he'd jump in between and take it for you without a second thought."

Harry inhaled sharply, "You think he'd die for me?"

She smiled, "He'd willingly die for you Harry, take my word on that, but you needn't worry because if someone threw a killing curse at you, I'd kill the wizard with my bare hands."

Harry smiled genially, "Death threats are very unbecoming of you Hermione."

"In this case I'd make an exception." She said lightly, waving her hand dismissively.

"Thanks Hermione, you know I'd do the same for you." He said quietly.

She grinned widely, "You already have Harry, so many times."

He cocked his head to the side, "I'm always here for you Hermione."

She nodded seriously, "Just like I'll always be there for you and so will Ron, even if he's refusing to admit it right now."

"It's good to know I have strength in my small numbers." He said facetiously.

She laughed and threw a crumpled parchment at his head to which he responded with a mock-indignant squawk.

Ron was now on his feet with Neville hot on his heels and hovering beside her worriedly, "Hermione?" He asked nervously.

She looked at him with calculating eyes, "I have a plan Ron, get the twins, Ginny and Creeveys here, we have lots to do."

With that said she left a dumbstruck Ron in her wake and headed up to her room. She still had some finer points to iron out.

She fisted her injured hand in cold anger – Umbridge started this war, and she would finish it. As she opened the door to her Dorm, she thankfully found both Lavender and Parvati absent; her self-control was at an all-time low and she would not want to be held responsible for what she would do to those slags should they have roused her ire further.

She approached her bedside and pulled out a quill, some parchment and an inkwell, she had mostly everything she needed. She was about to leave when she stopped and turned back, heading to her small bedside table.

Hogwarts didn't provide bedside tables, it was something she had transfigured and she worked to keep the enchantment running every week: It was small, wooden and relatively simplistic in design, but she loved it, because it was her creation. Atop the table rested a single photo-frame, a wizarding photo that Collin had taken the year

before. She gingerly picked up the photograph and looked at it for what must have been the hundredth time, there they were: herself, Ron and Harry, laughing together as they stood beside Zonko's in Hogsmeade. It was a perfect weekend, when the times were so much more innocent. She sighed when she saw Harry wink at her; it felt like forever since she last saw him.

She looked at the new scar she had accumulated – it seemed like a steady event at Hogwarts – First-year, she got pricked mercilessly by the keys when going after the stone, Second-year she unconsciously got a scar as she slid down the wall when she was petrified, Third-year she got numerous scrapes and bruises and some lasting scars during her foray with Harry through time and Fourth-year she scratched badly against one of Viktor's transfigured shark teeth. But this year, she had the worst kind of scar, a scar that made her visibly ill when she merely glanced at it, it mocked her, it laughed at her.

In the dim light of the room, she saw the shining leftovers of dried blood bring out the words that Umbridge forced her to write:

I will respect my betters.

"Okay Hermione, now that we're all here tell us what happened." Ron demanded now at the end of his patience.

They were assembled in a corner of the Common Room: Fred and George had been kind enough to extend a rather large and airtight privacy ward over them so they could discuss matters in relative piece. Hermione had actually complemented their work with a spell of her own and cemented their privacy.

She took a deep breath and she explained, she told them about her detention, the blood quill, McGonagall's defeat and giving up her Prefect badge. She explained everything with all the relevant details and detached facts.

Upon finishing there was silence – they were horrified.

Ron calmly got up, his steps were jerky and he stood contritely in front of her with his hand outstretched, palm up, he needn't have

bothered with words, or maybe he was incoherent with rage, she couldn't decide.

Biting her lip thoughtfully, Hermione rested her hand on top of his, baring her knuckles and scars to view. The others leaned in to get a better look and Ginny looked like she was about to implode while Neville and the Creeveys looked sick, the twins had oddly blank expressions adorning their faces.

With gentle hands, as if he were afraid his mere breath might agitate her, Ron lifted her hand and observed it avidly, he moved it this way and that, never once touching or even approaching her scars. Hermione for her part regarded him with bewilderment; he was so... different. His rough hands touched her smooth, marred skin, never once letting go but never resting in their exploration either.

"How much did it hurt?" He whispered but the restrained fury in his voice wasn't lost on her.

"It hurt." She didn't have to say more.

Finally his examination ended, he carefully withdrew his hands from her damaged one, placing them instead on her shoulders. For a second, she had no idea what he was doing and the very next second, she was engulfed in a bone-crushing hug. Ron was applying every inch of his strength and she was slightly afraid he was trying to meld them together.

"Ro-Ron" She strangled out.

It looked like he inherited his mother's patented hugging ability.

He let go of her and kept her an arm's length away, bending down so he could look into her eyes in a straight line-of-sight, "She will never hurt you again. I will never allow it to happen again."

He said it sincerely, honestly and with the obvious underlying threat. For once, Hermione was speechless.

An uncomfortable throat clearing was made behind them and the two turned to see the somewhat embarrassed and slightly smug looks on their friends' faces.

"If you two lovebirds are done cuddling, Hermione you had a plan for us." Ginny said coyly causing both Ron and Hermione to turn beet-red.

He let go of her hand and although she didn't show it, she missed the warmth and assurance his touch brought her.

Shaking herself out of her stupor Hermione cleared her throat before speaking. After all, she couldn't admit to the level to which Ron had flustered her.

"Right, we've all established that Umbridge is a bint and terrible teacher to boot." Hermione started only to be interrupted.

"Such language, Gred." One of the twins started.

"I concur, Forge," he said pretending to wipe a tear from his eye, "she's all grown up now."

Ginny rapped the two of them on the back of their heads, "Shut it, go on Hermione."

Hermione gave her a thankful smile, "We need to learn to defend ourselves, and we need to be prepared for when the time comes to fight and Harry returns."

The others looked at her completely serious, "What do you propose we do Hermione?" Neville squeaked out.

She raked her gaze over all of them as she answered, "We start a unit, with us and those we trust and we train each other. Alone we're weak, but we all have our individual strengths; if we teach each other and capitalize on each other's abilities, we will become formidable opponents."

"What do you mean 'form a unit'?" Surprisingly, it was Ron who asked this question.

Hermione nodded to him, "I'm not saying let's start a club or some such, we form a core group and allow some others to join, together we all become stronger. I can do research in any subject areas we find worth looking into, Fred and George, despite their grades, are two geniuses and can teach us some rather interesting magic that

we can derive many uses from, Neville is Sprout's Herbology prodigy, there is a lot we can learn. We offer something and learn from everyone else."

She stopped to take a breath and saw the others think about her idea with pensive expressions.

"I think it's a good idea." Ginny said suddenly.

The Creeveys nodded enthusiastically, Fred and George gave a mock-'here here' and Ron smiled genially.

"First things first, we need a place to practice." Hermione said starting with bare essentials.

"Leave that to my dearest brother and myself." Fred (or George?) said dismissively and Hermione accepted their word, telling them to find a place as soon as possible.

"Whom else can we trust to let in on the secret?" Was the next one.

Ginny volunteered, "I'll make a list tonight for everyone from Gryffindor and I'll even do a bit of asking around in the other Houses. The more trustworthy people we have on our side the better."

Hermione wrote that down and told her she had a week to compile the list.

Collin asked the third question, one she had in fact planned, "How do we communicate with one another more discreetly? We've attracted enough attention today."

Ron concurred, "Collin's right, the climate in Gryffindor is delicate, Seamus and Cormac have gone on a warpath against us and will probably get a report of some sort about this rather obvious meeting in the middle of the Common Room no less."

Hermione placated them, "I thought about that as well and am working on something to solve this problem, and I suspect it will be done within the week." She assured them.

"So what do we call ourselves?" Dennis Creevey voiced.

That stopped everyone in their tracks, "Good question little one." One of the twins mused, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"We're coming together to protect Hogwarts," Neville spoke up and everyone turned to him with raised eyebrows, he blushed under their scrutiny but continued nonetheless, "we're here to fight You-Know-Who, the Death Eaters and even the Ministry, we're Protectors forming an Alliance."

"Protector's Alliance, nah, that's a bit long." The other twin dismissed, "but the sentiment is in the right place."

"We can call it PA for short." Ginny defended and Neville gave her a thankful smile for her support.

"The PA?" They mulled it over.

"Its perfect," Hermione interceded and the others looked at her questioningly, "only we're not going to be the Protector's Alliance, we unite under the banner of Harry Potter, the one who has protected the wizarding world since he was a toddler; we're the Potter Alliance."

Loud thumping of feet was made and the twins had to be restrained.

As the meeting ended and Hermione and Ginny headed up to the girl's dormitories amidst the curious and some distrustful gazes of some of their housemates, something had changed.

That night as Hermione changed into her nightclothes, Lavender and Parvati gushed about how Parvati had been made prefect and Lavender maliciously asked Hermione what she'd done to lose her coveted post on the first day of term. Hermione didn't even flinch because the comment hardly fazed her.

She fished in her bag for the one parchment that she held near and dear to her heart no matter what. She opened the slightly rumpled piece of paper and used her wand to remove the creases.

Settling into bed, she pulled up her covers, and read the parchment one more time, hoping to divine some new glimmer of hope through the frustratingly vague words.

Dear Hermione,

I don't even know where to start, but I guess I'll just say that I'm not under any form of pressure when writing this because I know you will be considering that. I've made this decision on my own free will, I'm leaving because I want my free will to be mine to enjoy, my life to be mine to live and my freedom mine to control. This isn't me being stupid and rash, I've thought this through thoroughly, this is in everyone's best interests.

The mere thought of someone targeting you or Ron makes me sick, I don't think I'd be able to live through it if one of you died because of your association with me. I want you to be happy and safe.

Stick together because it's going to be hard this year, I've left so you and Ron need not suffer because of what the Wizarding World is making me out to be. I'll be back when I'm ready.

I'm going to miss you Hermione.

Love,

Harry.

In that moment as she put away the letter with a lone tear running down her cheek, she knew what had changed. She turned to her side and looked at the picture of the two boys that ruled her life, whether she admitted it or not.

Harry winked at her and smiled.

She smiled back.

A revolution sparked.

The Potter Alliance took birth.

He twirled the yew wand in his hand threateningly. He was not happy. His red eyes searched the room he was in; they registered everything within, taking note of all the details and making plans to use various items for various purposes. It was a wide room, not big, but wide, a long wall stood in front of him as his chair was backed

against the other side, on a slightly raised platform. He particularly liked this wall; it was long, grey and barren: nondescript enough to not be noticeable but dark enough to suit his purposes.

Voldemort was in a bad mood—no, he was in a foul mood because his Death Eaters had failed him yet again. Their incompetence knew no bounds.

"Wormtail," he hissed to his weakest sycophant.

The rat-faced man came scurrying forward, his slightly bedraggled robes flailing by his sides due to his large girth; he stood in front of his master with his head lowered.

"I am at your service, My Lord." He said reverently.

Voldemort sighed internally. No matter what people thought, he didn't particularly appreciate the fawning and desperate servitude some of his Death Eaters insisted on showing him. He had found that the most desperate to please with words were generally the most useless as well.

"Bring in Malfoy, Rosier and Avery." He said calmly while controlling his itch to curse the ignoble rodent.

With nary a twitch the bulbous wizard ran from the room and fetched those that his Master bid forth. The three tall Death Eaters entered in full black regalia, their signature silver masks in place. As one, they bowed with their heads lowered.

"Lucius, tell me, what have you to tell me about the runaway Harry Potter?" Voldemort started silkily, his yew wand being flipped between his fingers nonchalantly.

"Master, the boy has hidden his tracks well," Lucius started while still bowing, "we've already performed a full sweep of Britain, searching all the nooks and crannies. At first we thought this might be a ploy of the old man, hiding him in plain view, but sources within Hogwarts have revealed that neither Dumbledore nor Potter's friends have any idea where he is. In fact, they too are equally avidly searching for him."

Voldemort sighed tiredly, "Yes, yes, this is the same thing you said in your last report; I want to know where he is Lucius."

Lucius hesitated, "We've already searched through both Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, there were no new transfer students under assumed names nor were there any discrepancies among other students ruling out the possibility of a polyjuiced imposter."

"You're only informing me of the number of ways you've failed Lucius. Besides, even assuming Potter would be cunning enough to polyjuice himself in place of an older student and attend another school, he'd hardly go to Durmstrang, and the old man would never stand for it!" Voldemort pointed out calmly, "Now answer me Lucius, what do you know of his whereabouts?"

Lucius hesitated and his hesitation was all the answer Voldemort needed.

"My Lord, I—"

"Paniquero!" Voldemort bellowed and cursed the senior Malfoy.

Lucius fell over unconscious immediately.

"Wormtail," he indicated, calling the little man forward, "take Lucius to the Infirmary, tell him that I am dissatisfied with his progress and as punishment for his prolonged failure to locate the boy, his blindness has proven to be a thorn in my side. Since his eyes are as useless as they are, I have blinded him. I will only remove the curse when I have Harry Potter's location."

Wormtail nodded and levitated Lucius out of the room quickly.

"Now Rosier, tell me of the cousin, the one you failed to finish in time, is the task complete?" Voldemort asked while placing his wand firmly in his grasp.

"Yes, My Lord." He responded emotionlessly.

"Excellent Rosier, at least some of you aren't completely inept. You may leave."

Rosier bowed and left leaving only the trembling Avery and Dark Lord alone in the room.

"Avery, I have a special assignment for you."

"I live to please you, My Lord." He said off the bat.

"There is a prophecy, in the Department of Mysteries that I must acquire; I need Harry Potter to retrieve it for me, for without him only I can get it. Seeing as I cannot simply walk into the Ministry and ruin all our plans, I am keeping you responsible of the prophecy, make sure that the Unmentionable Division does not get wind of the prophecy and move it, it must still be easily accessible when I make my move. Is that clear?"

"Crystal, My Lord."

With the last Death Eater out of his vision, Voldemort sat back and contemplated. He had a plan, to lure the boy to get the prophecy for him so he wouldn't have to go there himself. The lull in the Wizarding World perpetuated by the Ministry was giving him the perfect cover for subterfuge. But he needed that prophecy before doing anything further.

He needed Harry Potter.

"You can run boy, but you can't hide." He whispered into the silence of his dark room.

As the door closed behind him, he took a deep breath to calm himself. Looking to his sides he noticed a few Death Eaters walking about but nobody seemed to pay him any mind. He walked towards the apparition point with a quick gait; he had to get out of there.

"Rosier!" Came a whisper from his side and he stopped short.

He turned himself and thanked Merlin his mask was still in place to hide his surprise.

"Avery?" He sneered right back.

A taller Death Eater walked towards him and crossed his hands in front of his chest, he was a good head taller than Rosier, but this wouldn't be the moment he would be intimidated by a few extra inches.

"We need to talk," Avery said in a calm baritone.

With a barely perceptible nod the two Death Eaters bade a hasty retreat from the central foyer towards an isolated room. Avery opened the deep mahogany double doors and ushered Rosier inside, following him in after surveying their surroundings, insuring their being alone, before closing the doors.

"What is it, Avery?" Rosier asked impatiently after setting up a privacy bubble.

"Do you have any idea what you have done?" Avery hissed angrily.

Rosier shrugged nonchalantly, "Not when you're being so cryptic."

"You and I both are aware that the cousin of the boy still lives, he's practically disappeared, but he still lives. Lying to the Dark Lord is tantamount to suicide." Avery growled.

Rosier quirked an eyebrow, but that was masked by his silver mask, "Of course I do know, but what I also realize is what the Dark Lord doesn't know won't hurt me. He never needs to find out. In the grand scheme of things, the cousin is meaningless."

"It is a matter of principle of never lying to Him!" Avery shot back.

"Principles are secondary to self-preservation." Rosier pointed out.

Avery paused, "You're planning something Rosier, you're too smart to make a mistake of this magnitude if you weren't planning something to get away with it all."

Rosier chuckled, "I have no idea what you're talking about Avery and if you know what's best for you, you will never breathe a word of this meeting to anyone. This never happened."

Avery mockingly grinned right back, "You have nothing on me Rosier, for all intents and purposes I own you now, or would you

prefer the Dark Lord gaining wind of your lies and possible deflection?"

A tense moment engulfed the two where Rosier cursed his luck over and over again. He knew lying in front of another would be a mistake but he had to go through with it.

"Alright then Avery, what do you want?" Rosier asked through clenched teeth.

Avery smirked in victory, "Send your daughter to my chambers tonight, we'll discuss my terms tomorrow depending on her performance of course."

Rosier froze, his blood turned to ice at the lewd suggestion thrown at him. It took every ounce of his inner Slytherin to maintain his false calm.

"That is agreeable." He said through clenched teeth.

"Brilliant." Avery said with a wide smile, he turned around to take down the privacy bubble with a wave of his wand.

"Obliviate!"

Rosier left the room visibly shaken, but otherwise as calm as he could manage. His memory charm was impeccably done, he knew that but Avery was an accomplished wizard and breaking through a memory charm wasn't exactly difficult for the well-organized mind. It was only a matter of time now.

This significantly upped the ante of his plans now. Merlin help him.

Stirring, pouring, heating, measuring, adding, removing, testing, failing.

That was the endless cycle that defined his life for the last two months. Potion making: a vile and aggravating practice, but necessary nonetheless. Woe is he to be reduced to this, hiding in his basement and concocting the vilest of elixirs for innocent means. His tired hands held the stirrer steady; he knew that he had to pause

for thirty seconds after stirring clockwise for fifteen minutes, before the commencement of the anticlockwise stirs.

He knew this because he mucked the potion the first time because he forgot this simple step.

His grip was tight, showing the whiteness of his knuckles and his emaciated frame, he looked every bit of the escaped convict that he was. But there was no choice; he had switched prisons, switched gaolers, yet the nightmares persisted alternating between reminding him of his failures as a son to his mother and father, as a brother to his brother, as a friend to his fellow Marauders, as a godfather to his runaway godson. He had failed on every account, his mother died cursing him, his brother dead kissing the hem of a maniac, his friends dead, betrayed by his suggestions and his godson missing due to his inability to care for him. He could have spent his time curling into himself, crying, feeling miserable, powerless, stuck in this house that he swore never to return to, or he could try to make amends: beginning with the one who needed him the most: Harry.

That was why he was breathing fumes of questionable nature as he attempted one of the most complicated brews in the Black Library. That was why he let his hair turn greasy despite the sardonic comments of the greasy git. That was why he skipped meals, forewent meetings and company to keep an eye on this impossible potion; to make sure he got it right this time, to make sure he found his godson.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Keeping his eyes firmly on the cauldron, he answered the visitor, surprising himself by the growing raspy quality of his voice caused by disuse, "Who is it?"

"Remus."

He sighed in relief. He was glad it was Remus, his one comrade, his only friend, his surviving plotter.

"Come in."

The door creaked open and in came Remus Lupin, his clothes shabbier than usual and his brow creased in tiredness and worry, yet his eyes sharp and alert.

"How is it coming along, Sirius?" He asked quietly.

He sighed, he hated when Remus asked him inane questions. Did he look like Snivellus: potions' master extraordinaire? How did he think the potion was coming along?

"How do you mean Remus?" He asked testily.

"I mean how far have you gotten? Will it be ready soon to do...what it must?" He hesitated, probably sensing his ire.

"I've already failed it twice, the first two batches ruined a cauldron each," Sirius ranted in a controlled voice, "we're already attracting a fair amount of attention with all this secrecy and soon Dumbledore will come investigating the minute he has a free moment. He will insist to be part of the plot and you know that can't happen, we can't let that happen."

"The only avenue available to us is to finish the potion as fast as possible." Remus suggested weakly.

Well for Merlin's sake! What did it seem like Sirius was doing? Making Easter eggs?

He tipped his left hand to the side and added some of the beetroot meshed with ebony shavings. The potion acquired a deep purple colour and Sirius sighed in relief. He did it. He finally got the third step down without a single mistake.

"Is it done?" Remus asked excitedly, looking at the potion with caution, his eyes wide.

Sirius looked at him suspiciously, "Course not, I just got through the last of the difficult steps, now we have to let it sit for two weeks before repeating the whole process again and then it will sit for another three weeks and it will be ready for use—finally!"

"Oh right, yeah." Remus said sheepishly, backing away.

Sirius crossed his arms as he double-checked the temperature of the fire and then backed away slowly, a small smile creeping to his lips.

"I just hope it works." Sirius said pensively, "After all the energy and time we've invested in it."

"Yeah, I know what you mean, but it will work, I'm sure. By the way, I was wondering, when it's done, do we add something to activate it?" Remus inquired vaguely.

"How do you mean?" Sirius asked, "The book says hair of a relative, the closer the better. So I'm just going to put in a strand of my hair and it will give me a rudimentary map and vision of where Harry is."

Remus' eyes were wide but he schooled his features, "Right, of course, it should work. But aren't you worried it might just point to M...Andromeda or Narcissa or Bellatrix even Tonks, I mean you're more closely related to them than Harry by blood."

Sirius sighed and dragged his palms down his face wearily, closing his eyes and rubbing his eyelids in a gesture of fortifying his patience, "We've had this discussion before Remus, if you don't believe me check my records at St. Mungo's or the Ministry, it will work."

"Right," Remus said suspiciously.

The idle chatter continued between the two until Sirius had to make a few more adjustments to the potion and Remus took his leave.

Sirius shook his head in wonderment at the lackadaisical attitude of his friend and the little faith he had in him. Focusing his attention back on the potion, he was trying to temper it correctly before moving onto the rest period.

An hour, possibly more passed as Sirius meticulously worked.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Dear Merlin! He nearly ruined his third batch.

"Who is it?" He strained to keep the irritation out of his tone.

"It's me, Paddy." Came Remus' voice.

"Come in." He said shaking his head and refocusing his attention.

The door opened and Remus waltzed in, a serious expression on his face, "Is the potion working well?"

"Yes." Sirius answered neutrally, "You already checked, what is it?"

Remus furrowed his brow in confusion, "What are you talking about, Padfoot? I just entered Headquarters for the first time in the past five days."

Sirius chuckled, "That's a bad joke Moony, and you were here a little while ago."

"No, I wasn't."

The two Marauders looked at each other in bewilderment, and then realization dawned.

"Tonks," they said simultaneously.

Remus rushed out of the lab and Sirius hurriedly finished the last few steps and put the potion on rest before following Remus out as well. They hurried up the stairs and entered the kitchen only to find Tonks sitting there calmly, her hair a vivid purple, curled in a manner obsequious to her heart-shaped face. A big blue report rested on her lap and her lips for once, not trembling in mirth but thinned in seriousness.

"That was you!" Sirius said venomously but Tonks was unaffected.

"Sit down," She said sharply, "You have a lot of explaining to do."

Meekly, both mighty ex-Marauders complied.

"Try again Harry, I want a perfect stab at the end of the movement, to give it a bit of a flourish." She intoned sharply, while critically analyzing every one of his movements.

Harry gulped involuntarily when he saw that look in her eyes, or maybe he was just imagining things again, Merlin this was unpredictable. He unsteadily brought his wand forth and stabbed the air in front of him while finishing the incantation.

"No, no, no! Rubbish, complete and utter rubbish! How do you think you're going to be useful to anyone if you can't even perform a simple Duplication Charm without difficulty?" She snapped at him.

Harry was sheepish; he tried again, concentrating on his movements and the exact manner in which Cassandra had told him to perform the spell, the piece of parchment in front of him vibrated and shook, sweat collected on his brow. With a quick flourish he stabbed and the parchment... exploded in his face.

Cassandra groaned in a very unladylike manner and smacked her head in resignation.

"I'm sorry Cassandra, but I just can't seem to concentrate today." Harry provided weakly.

Cassandra turned her back to him and Harry got a tantalizing view of her bare skin (thank Merlin she preferred backless dresses), she sat down in the nearby chair and regarded him with keen eyes. For some unknown reason, Harry just knew that she knew that he was gawking at her behind her back.

"You have been like this all day Harry. At first your animagus training was fruitless, which leads me to believe that perhaps you've inherited your mother's recessive gene in that department like the Amanta. However, you've passed the test designed for animagi, which begs the idea of you having a form that is inaccessible for whatever reason. Then you utterly fail in the recreation of a simple Duplication charm and Voice Modulation Charm as well. This is very unlike you Harry, you must tell me what it is that is bothering you?"

Harry sighed, "Fine," he ran a hand through his hair and took the seat opposite the vampire.

"You, you distract me, after what happened between us, you go on to pretend like it was nothing, so yes, I can't concentrate." Harry vented, his voice raised a few octaves in the end.

Cassandra's brow creased in consternation, she pulled her shoulders back daintily and rested in an elegant position in the armchair, "It is odd that you speak to me of that event in such a tone. I was under the impression that you enjoyed yourself, or at least you seemed to have enjoyed yourself then."

Harry blushed a vivid red, "That's not what I... I mean, I..."

"Yes, tell me, what do you mean to say?" Cassandra asked neutrally.

Harry took a deep breath to calm himself, "Why did you do it in the first place?"

Silence enveloped to the two as Harry looked at her questioningly and she bit her lower lip in hesitation.

"It was a... heat of the moment response, admittedly not one of my finest moments of clarity, but... I... lost control and let my... baser instincts get the better of me."

Harry wanted to believe that answer because Harry, by nature, was a trusting bloke despite the life and death experiences he'd had, he really wanted to believe that Cassandra rode him like a donkey in the 'heat of the moment'; but something within him refused to let that answer stand. Something within him knew it was a lie.

"Tell me the truth." He said crisply, surprising himself with his bluntness.

Cassandra's uncomfortable expression dropped and was replaced by a blank look, "That is the truth." She answered neutrally.

"Then why don't I believe you?"

What more could she say to that? Green met amber as the two stared at each other from the opposite sides of the Amanta's favourite coffee table.

"I think that's enough for today, go home, clear you head, work on those Occlumency exercises and we'll discuss this later." Cassandra said dismissively as she stood up, her eyes not wavering from his gaze.

Harry was quizzical, but veiled it in the throes of his distrust for the woman in front of him.

He turned away from her and headed towards the entrance hallway where his shoes were neatly stacked.

"Be wary tonight Harry," he paused but didn't turn around.

"How do you mean?" He asked despite himself.

"Don't blindside your surroundings in the quest of a new bedfellow." She said eerily.

When he turned around to ask her what she was implying, the room was empty and she was gone.

More than a touch bothered by the vampire, Harry didn't question her strange parting words and simply left as fast as he could. Once outside, he headed down the cobbled lane and made his way to his hotel room, he already cancelled his lesson with Stefan and in lieu of it was going to take a shower and put on his best attire for the evening of his first ever date. In his haste, he didn't notice two pale amber eyes watching his retreating back from the roof of the Amanta's house.

Hurrying along the restaurant area in the Romanian Magical district, Harry came face-to-face with his destination: Maria's Café. It was a quaint little place that smelled strongly of tea and something sweet that Harry couldn't quite decipher.

He took a deep breath and centred himself, squaring his shoulders; he calmly opened the glass door and headed inside to find Sonia. There were a few customers milling about and nobody seemed to notice his presence or even if they did, they paid him no mind.

He meandered through the tiny waiting area and headed towards the counter where Sonia had her back turned as she spoke through the tiny window to the chef.

"Hey, Sonia," he greeted cheerily.

She froze and turned to look at him, only to break out in a huge grin.

"H-hi!" She stuttered, "You're early."

Really, was he? He checked his watch and it was seven sharp.

"Uh no, we decided seven, well, it's seven." He said helplessly hoping to Merlin he hadn't just made a fool of himself.

She seemed just as flustered as he felt, "Really it's seven already? Oh...um...just give me a moment and I'll change and we can leave."

She disappeared out back and Harry breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment there he really thought he had messed up, it was good to know that she was the one who had forgotten. Although that had him start wondering why she had forgotten, he couldn't get her out of his mind all day. Was someone else on her mind? Was she using him in some way? Did she plan on leading him on with this date with some ulterior motive?

"Alright, I'm ready to go." Came a voice that cut through his musings and he turned to face his date.

She looked good in a long dark blue robe that hugged her figure; her hair was just left back since it was obvious she didn't have any time to do anything with it. She wore only a little make-up, but her bright blue eyes were clearly visible.

"Great."

Harry led her out and the two awkwardly made their way to a nearby restaurant that Sonia said she enjoyed frequenting. They ordered their meals and discussed their reasons for ordering it. They then discussed Sonia's work now from before and her satisfaction with it. They then sat in an abrupt silence and looked away awkwardly, not having anything more to contribute. Sonia tried to engage him in conversation about what he was doing in Romania, but he wasn't really at liberty to discuss that and was vague in his responses which Sonia caught on to and immediately dropped the matter. Once again they sat in silence; looking in all directions except towards each other, when mercifully, their meals finally arrived.

At Sonia's insistence Harry asked for some red wine, which was promptly provided, and the two shared a few glasses in tittered nervousness.

After one glass, Harry felt reasonably better and discussed Quidditch, which Sonia attempted valiantly to be interested in. After the second glass, Sonia spoke of robes and her favourite kind of robes and Harry pretended to be enraptured by her. Three glasses down the two just giggled lowly in-between conversation. When the second bottle was opened, they were laughing raucously and waving their hands around in animated gestures. Halfway through the second bottle, the waiter asked them to leave and they quietly (amidst abrupt bursts of laughs) paid their bill and bade a hasty retreat, the bottle held firmly in Harry's grasp.

"...and then, and then the hippogriff jumped on him and broke his arm!"

Sonia howled in laughter when he finished his tale and Harry giggled along with her.

They walked back to Sonia's home at a sedate pace, or more likely they were so inebriated that walking at a faster pace would have resulted in some form of bodily harm. Holding hands while steadying each other the two finally made it to a modest cottage in one of the poorer yet marginally safer districts of Magical Romania.

"Would you like to come in?" Sonia invited in an abruptly soft voice.

Harry shrugged nonchalantly, his nervousness but a dull throb at the back of his mind; the alcohol (though fading from his system) was working wonders in lowering his inhibitions. She held the door open for him to come through and he complied. As he crossed the threshold, the hair at the back of his neck stood on end, but he ignored, it was probably his nerves. She followed him through the door and the house was dark.

"Uh... Where are the lights Sonia?" He asked trying to adjust to the reduced lighting.

Slam!

The door shut behind him and Harry turned around immediately to see the only source of light coming from outside was cut off and he was literally plunged in complete darkness. Without thinking twice Harry withdrew his wand, something just seemed off...

"Sonia...?" He asked uncertainly, counting up to ten in his head for a reply.

"Diffindo!"

Harry jumped away from where he was standing as soon as he heard a man's voice. Rolling on the ground, he accidentally crashed into some form of furniture, a chair by the feel of it.

The bright yellow cutting curse impacted upon his previous location while he was mid-roll and in that brief time, he saw the viciously lit up eyes of a wizard a few feet away from him.

"Confringo!" Came another yell and Harry was on the move again, the chair he had topped over blasting and sending shrapnel in all directions. He gasped when he felt a stray piece of wood pierce his trousers and draw blood.

He knew for certain there was more than one person out to get him. Steeling his resolve, he started applying some of the Amanta's and now Cassandra's lessons. He disillusioned himself and silenced his movements. Pushing his body to a nearby wall that was reasonably distanced enough from the thick of the action, he observed dispassionately when two more blasting curses were let loose and more furniture was destroyed.

In the light from the spellfire, he counted the number of men in the room, six and he was alone.

Deciding to use the darkness to his own advantage, he pointed his wand in the general direction of the room incanted, "Expecto Patronum!"

All six pairs of eyes snapped in his directions only to look away due to the appearance of the blinding white stag that was his patronus. Narrowing his eyes into slits, Harry jumped into the fray and began throwing curses and charms in all directions.

"Confringo! Depulso! Stupefy!"

Two of his assailants were stunned and they slumped to the ground, another who was trying to help them got hit with a banisher and crashed into a wall, losing consciousness in the process. That left three that avoided his attacks and were closing in on him.

Just as they were about to attack, Harry cancelled his patronus and the room was plunged in darkness again. A series of groans was heard as the attackers lost sight of their target. Harry immediately moved as spell-fire impacted his location, he renewed his disillusionment on himself and leaned against the nearby table.

Annoyed with the tables being turned on them, one of the attackers shot little balls of light into the air that lit up the whole room. They looked around for Harry, but couldn't find him. Another began nearing his fallen allies and Harry struck.

"Accio!"

The three wizards shot spells in the direction of his voice, what they did not notice was a chair being summoned from the other side of the room that crashed into one of them. The attacked wizard staggered, but did not falter. While he was busy regaining his bearings, the disillusioned Potter avoided the spell-fire and whispered a banishment that hurled the large table at the wizard. With a loud thwack he was knocked out, leaving two more wizards to be dealt with.

"That's it." One of the wizards said, he stepped forward and began a steady volley of spells in Harry's general direction. There was only so much Harry could dodge before his disillusioned outline became noticeable. As he became a tangible target, the other wizard jumped in to supplement the attack.

Harry moved around as much as he could and shot back a few spells, which were easily deflected. He was valiantly disregarding the injury on his leg from before, but it was getting more and more pronounced with all his movement. A stray orange curse nipped him on his shoulder and the skin there was ripped off, allowing blood to pour out and flow liberally down his crisp white shirt.

He cried out and fell down, a hand on his shoulder to stem the blood loss. The other two wizards stopped attacking when they noticed his incapacitation. He was about to raise his wand and try one last attack when he saw a jet of red light head directly at him. He tried to get up, to jump or dodge, he was too slow...

...And the world turned dark.

He groggily came to consciousness, his vision was greatly blurred and he instinctively searched for his glasses on the ground beside him. They were thrust in his hands by an unknown entity and he jammed them on his face, surprised the next second to find his wand placed safely in his pocket. His mind was still sluggish and a bit dizzy and he vaguely felt someone nursing his shoulder wound.

He looked around and noticed he was still in the same room and the light baubles were still up in the air. The six wizards who had attacked him were tightly bound and unconscious in front of him.

He wanted to get up and shake off his weariness when a sharp pain shot up his right shoulder.

"Argh!" He groaned.

"Keep still," came a strict command from whoever had handed him his glasses.

He looked at the person and saw tresses of shiny midnight-black hair, flowing in gentle ringlets. A pale hand wrapped around an ebony wand was poised over his shoulder and the sweetest voice was muttering incantations to alleviate his discomfort.

Harry stared in awe at the beauty and just then, two iridescent amber eyes looked up at him through a pale, unblemished face and pouting red, full lips.

"Angel..." Harry heard himself sigh.

She laughed; it was a tinkling sound like church bells, "Quite the opposite Harry, quite the opposite..."

A few minutes later he was helped up and she waved her wand at the six wizards, unbinding and awakening them. She performed a strong memory charm followed by a confounding and set the sextet on their way. She then held on his hand while he continued to stare at her in undisguised awe, which she seemed to be blossoming under.

The feeling of being squeezed through a rubber tube and back did nothing to help his condition and left him even more disoriented than before. The beautiful woman who seemed vaguely familiar now helped him into a chair. She then told him she was stepping out for a minute and left him to his own devices.

He looked around the house, it looked familiar, and the foyer and the coffee table seemed almost...memorable.

It hit him like a ton of bricks.

He shook his head as everything began coming back to him: his training, the Amanta, his date and finally his rescuer.

"I see you're feeling better." Came a soft voice.

The vampire knelt on the ground beside where he was sitting and handed him a glass of water, which he gratefully accepted.

"You saved me from them." He finally managed.

"Yes, I did warn you to take heed of your surroundings and not lose sight of them in the wake of the possibility of a new bedfellow." She said chidingly and Harry could barely respond.

His energy began coming back to him and he felt better, he then eyed the glass of water suspiciously.

"What was in this?" He said indicating the glass.

"Mild pepper-up, not enough to charge you up, but enough to give you strength to stay awake and concentrate for a little while longer." She said informatively, rising from her place and taking a seat opposite him.

He wanted to feel angry at her for feeding him a potion without his knowledge, but for some reason he couldn't muster up the will to be so.

"There was also a calming draught mixed in there, wasn't it?" Although it was framed like a question it was mostly rhetorical.

She quirked an eyebrow, "Its good to know that at least Master Yelizerov has taught you some tricks of his trade."

Harry placed the glass on the coffee table and took a deep breath while he tried to calm his racing thoughts.

"What happened tonight?" He decided to start with the obvious.

Cassandra sat back in her chair and elegantly rested her hands on her side, "Well the girl you took out was under compulsion by those wizards. She was compelled to get you drunk and then leave you at that house so they could take you easily."

Harry sighed in relief; at least now he knew Sonia hadn't done this on her own free will.

"She's been under compulsion for some time now, they staged the entire thing, and your original meeting after she gained new employment, your date... the whole spectacle was planned. The poor girl has no idea about you and was even given a compelled obliviation for after she served her purpose. It's terrible, really, to use someone like that." Cassandra said sadly although she didn't really seem sad at all.

"Who were they? Why go through such elaborate means to get me?" Harry asked askance.

Cassandra laughed derisively, oddly it didn't have the same effect as before, "You are the Boy-Who-Lived, there are people searching for you, powerful people who will go to any lengths to have you under their influence. It is hardly surprising they would hire a group of snatchers, although these weren't good ones to be honest."

Harry's world came crashing around him, "So I've been found out?" He asked through clenched teeth.

"No," she paused and hope swelled in his chest, "They were just incredibly lucky. They were hired out to search for you in Warsaw but didn't have much luck there. One of them is a local here and was visiting when he was in the Toperia Oala the night you had your little skirmish for that girl. He, despite being very drunk, recognized you and brought his team here to hunt you down. You're lucky because they were planning on detaining you first and then informing their contractor, so you haven't been found out."

"What of them now?" Harry asked, relieved.

"I have obliterated them of any memory of finding you. I compelled them to believe that they did indeed track down a youngster using their plan and were successful in capturing him, but later realized that he was not the British boy they had to find although he looked similar. So they killed you and were on their way back to Warsaw for one last sweep before heading towards Prague." Cassandra explained calmly and Harry marvelled at her ingenuity.

"I would suggest greater discretion in the future Harry, you were lucky I was here to save you this time." She advised.

"How did you know?" He couldn't help but asking.

"I saw it, granted it was hazy and unclear, I decided to err on the side of caution and kept an eye on you tonight. When you went in her home and she didn't follow, but locked you in and started walking away I knew something was wrong. I would have arrived a lot sooner but they had a warder in their midst who while not a genius was competent enough to keep me out and force me to break down his ward, strand by strand to get to you." She said with a hint of grudging respect for the warder.

"Thank you, Cassandra." He said sincerely.

"You're welcome, Harry."

Silence enveloped the two, as there was nothing left to explain. Cassandra rose from her seat and seemed to be deciding something.

"You can stay here tonight Harry, it's late anyway."

She moved to exit the room when he asked the one thing that had been bothering him for some time, "Why did you have sex with me, Cassandra?" There was no emotion in his tone and he stopped her mid-stride.

She didn't say anything for a long time but finally answered, "Memories."

Harry finally looked at her back questioningly, "Memories?"

She turned around and regarded him emotionlessly, "I told you the story of my life Harry, I loved my son greatly and to realize that he lived and I never got to know him, it was more painful than anything I can ever describe to you."

She looked in the distance as if remembering something and blood accumulated in her eyes, "They say time heals all wounds, what I came to realize is that 'they' who say this are specifically referring to humans, vampires are immune to time. What I felt over a hundred years ago, the pain and betrayal at the loss of my only son at the hands of that...man, that pain will never heal, it is a fresh wound that will never close and will always sting just as much. We may have immortal beauty, but we also have immortal pain and guilt Harry. But I learnt that I do have blood kin that is alive and well, but I cannot leave to seek her out. I have to stay here till Schimba returns for I have pledged to do so. But I was desperate to know more about her, see her in your memories, how she is, who she is..."

Red blood tears were flowing down her face and she wiped them away with a decisive sweep of her hand, "When a vampire drinks a magical's blood, we become privy to some of their memories and if we know what we are looking for, we can find an exact memory. I... staged the entire fiasco in a desperate attempt to get your blood, to get to your memories of my descendent. The reason I had to awaken your more amorous instincts is because as a magical, your blood becomes more actively charged by magic when excited, making it easier for me to find the right memory."

Harry's eyes widened comically, never in a million years had he expected that answer, and to think she did all this to just get some memories out of him. It was a bit over the top even for her. Especially because it was all so unnecessary, why did she need to go such means?

"Why didn't you just ask?" He couldn't help himself from pointing out.

She looked taken aback, "Excuse me?"

"Ask? You could have asked me? You could have found a pensieve somewhere, I mean if you were that desperate I'm sure you'd know where to find one and you could teach me how to put my memories in there and you could have observed all my memories of Professor Trelawney. If you couldn't find one, I wouldn't have minded allowing you to drink my blood within reason and had those memories anyway. I wouldn't have said no if you would have been honest with me." Harry said with just a tinge of disbelief at the lengths this woman would go through.

For the first time since meeting her, Harry saw that Cassandra's jaw was dropped and her mouth left wide open, "I guess... I just never considered asking. I'm not used to people freely volunteering anything; I'm used to taking things by force."

Harry just continued staring at her, "You were a Slytherin, weren't you?"

Her surprise vanished and she smirked, "What makes you say that?"

Harry shrugged, "Everything has to be a trade to you, in Gryffindor we do things because it's the right thing to do. Also you tend to answer a question with a question which is a frustratingly Slytherin quality. Anyway, just ask next time."

She nodded and turned around and headed to Schimba's room to gather some blankets and sheets and a pillow for the overnight guest. She entered the room and headed towards the large cupboard to the side where she knew all the beddings were stored.

She was rummaging through the various articles when she was interrupted.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

She turned around and looked at the interrupter curiously.

"Is there something else you wanted to ask, Harry?"

"Yes, in fact there is." He answered a bit cheekily.

Cassandra resumed her search for appropriate bedding when he took a few steps and stood behind her; she paused and turned around, only to come face-to-face with him. He was exactly her height.

"You kissed me that night." He said simply.

She narrowed her eyes, "Yes and I did a lot more as well."

"I know," he said smiling charmingly, "I thought I should return the favour."

"How do you me—" She began to ask only her words were smothered by his lips.

He gently touched her lips with his own and sucked on her upper lip, she was surprised because she generally anticipated such events and was never caught off guard. His gentle kissing turned a little passionate, his one hand wandered into her hair and the other to her waist, pulling her body closer to his own.

She was a century-old vampire, she could throw him off had she wanted to, but ultimately decided that she rather not. She melted into his embrace and for once, allowed herself to be led instead of doing the leading.

His lips left her mouth and began placing open-mouthed kisses on her neck, his hand fisted in her hair and tugged lightly at her roots as he scraped his teeth on the side of her neck, heading upwards to nibble on her ear. She moaned when reached there and slowly his lips travelled back to her mouth and kissed her some more.

Cassandra began losing herself in the pleasure, her responses to his advances becoming louder and rougher, her hand roamed his chest and locked around his neck, while the other headed southwards and stopped at his navel. Harry's hand wrapped around her waist let go and caught hold of her hand. He removed his lips from hers and took a step back to gaze at her. He guided her hand

southwards while the two locked eyes and he made her grip her hand around his hardened member through his trousers.

She bit her lip seductively, feeling a growing burning in-between her legs and she gave him a squeeze causing him to moan loudly and growl before claiming her lips even more vehemently than before.

Cassandra pushed him and he landed on the Amanta's bed, he sat back up and she immediately sat on his lap, continuing their kiss as their tongues finally began to explore each others' mouths. Harry's hands were firmly planted on her firm rear and he squeezed it from time to time causing her to chuckle.

"What are you doing to me, Harry?" She moaned as he lightly bit one of her nipples through the fabric of her robe.

His hands unfastened her robe and pulled it back, revealing her naked front, his eyes beholding her firm, round, milky-white mounds and pink nipples.

"What you've wanted me to do since the day we met." He answered simply before devouring one of her nipples.

Most certainly, it would be a night to remember for both the teenager and the century-old vampire.

The next few weeks were a blur of activity; Harry and Cassandra never discussed their night of passion but it had worked well to serve them both. They had covered an ample amount of work in Charms, working harder and faster than ever before. Harry believed he had reached his highlight the day Cassandra had observed his work on his combination of the duplication and banishing charm and marked that it was a progressive plan and she was interested in where it would lead.

Somewhere in between they had also made time to work on Occlumency and Cassandra was pleasantly surprised with the amount of advancement he had shown for someone his age. She explained that it was an exceptionally difficult mental discipline and for a novice, Harry was doing a commendable job. She then left him written instructions (in English) for how to proceed with that training even after she left, if he wanted to become better at it.

However, his Charms and Occlumency work though impressive was not even the beginning of his achievements under her tutelage. He had finally managed a partial animagus transmutation. He had developed large paws that he was very proud of and that had confused Cassandra.

"Harry, I thought you said that your father was a stag." She said trying to understand this strange development.

"He was." Harry answered confidently.

"Well then this makes very little sense, unless you have several other animagus bloodlines within your family. Is that possible?" She asked curiously.

Harry shrugged while continuing to observe his paws, "I know that my father was from a modest pureblood family. Most of the pureblood lines are interrelated in some way or another, or so I've been told."

Cassandra looked doubtful, "I find it hard to believe, when your father is an animagus who regularly practices his ability, it is a time and tested proof that you inherent the same form. This is a phenomenon that has been observed and attested by the Transfiguration Guild, its one of the basal rules of Transmutation, there has never been a documented exception to this rule, that is, unless both parents are animagi, then the child generally inherits one of their forms and in some exceptional cases both forms can be inherited. This isn't your case."

Harry just shrugged, looking at his paws once more, he couldn't really understand why, but something about his paws was uncannily familiar.

The second marked discovery in his forays with magic that Harry found was his growing affiliation with Divination. When Cassandra deemed his Occlumency ability as basic enough, he started learning to organize his mind in such a manner that he could coax his subconscious into interacting with his conscious mind.

"Your subconscious is an all-knowing being. Muggles are right in believing that we barely use a fraction of our mind in our entire

lives." She lectured, "It would make sense of course because if we had full use of our minds and unrestricted access to our subconscious, we would be perfect all-knowing beings, Gods in all sense of that word. The difference between a Seer and a regular witch or wizard is that the bridge between the subconscious and conscious mind is somewhat present and active from their birth. Although they cannot control this ability, the subconscious mind is far too powerful to bend to their wills; it acts whenever it feels or wishes to. The theory of studying Divination is that for those witches and wizards who do not have inherent bridges to their subconscious, such a bridge, or at least an imitation of it can be built with diligent study and more than a small modicum of skill."

"So that is why organizing my mind is necessary, I am essentially building a bridge in my own mind?" Harry asked, grappling to understand this new philosophy.

Cassandra shook her head in the negative, "Calling it a bridge is more a metaphor than an accurate description."

She sighed and contemplated the best possible avenue to bring this across, "Think of it this way, if it was a bridge that could be built, then theoretically any witch or wizard could succeed with enough practice, anyone could build it in their minds and I need not impress upon you the stupendous advantage an awareness of the future can provide. There is, or should be. a reason that over seventy percent of Divination students ultimately fail in having anything close to a fully-functional Inner Eye."

"Then why is it offered at school at all? If students would fail so spectacularly." Harry asked confused.

"Generally, the first set of exams that students undergo with Divination is their OWLs and those exams don't explicitly need a real prediction. With enough dedication and skill the conscious mind through observation and attention to detail can make predictions about people and their near futures' decisions or what kind of decisions they would make in any given situation. It is only in NEWT-level Divination that the truly gifted are expected to make real predictions. Or at least that is how it used to be taught in my time." Cassandra finished.

"Sadly that isn't the case anymore," Harry commented, "What do you need the crystal balls, palmistry, tea leaves and all that other stuff for then? If everything is within?"

Cassandra smiled, "Focusing agents, its easier to draw out your subconscious in any situation when there is a nearby focusing agent to calm the erratic nature of your conscious mind, so you can listen to the subconscious and its message. This calm can be in the fog of a crystal ball or in the squiggles of one's hand or the shapes formed in tea leaves and indeed, these forcefully induced calming agents can sometimes be triggers for what the subconscious mind decides to show you. Every Seer finds their own calming agent, but these few tend to apply themselves universally to one degree or another."

"Coming back to the original question, if it's not a bridge we're building, then what are we doing?" Harry asked in retrospect.

"Think of it as such," Cassandra started, "your subconscious is an ocean, within this ocean you have thrown in a small invulnerable quaffle, this quaffle is all that most of us use in our natural lives, and it is our conscious mind. Assuming that you are one of the thirty percent of students that get it right, through consistent practice of Divination, what you are essentially doing is making a small hole in the quaffle, so small that only a trickle, maybe a few drops of the ocean can get through, but the quaffle is meant to be invulnerable so ultimately the hole seals itself and no more of the ocean can come through. What little that does is what we call 'predictions'. With enough Divination practice, students that succeed can learn to condition their minds into making these holes, they have no control over it, and these holes are made instinctively when the mind sees fit."

"I think I understand." Harry said finally.

Yes, he had learnt a lot in all fields of Charms, Divination and Animagus training.

So it was with a heavy heart when the month of September came to an end, the last vestiges of summer had left the Romanian air and the coolness that preceded winter had settled in, it came time to say goodbye to Cassandra.

The last evening, Harry had taken Cassandra out for dinner, to thank her for all that she had done for him in the short while that they had known each other. They had a wonderful time and they discussed many things, but they never spoke of the next day, of what was to come and if they would ever see each other again.

When he had reached the statue that would let him enter the muggle world, Harry turned to say his final goodbye to Cassandra.

She was beautiful like always, but for once she lacked the sultry grace that she usually carried herself with as well as the audacious deadliness of her prowess. She seemed almost... vulnerable.

"I guess this is goodbye, Cassandra." Harry said softly.

"I believe it is, Harry. It has been a pleasure teaching you these past few weeks." She responded honestly.

"Where will you be headed now?"

She met his eyes and smiled and he knew exactly where, "I have my kin to meet, to learn from, I want to understand why I never knew that my son was not lost."

"So you will be headed to Hogwarts then?" Harry asked quietly.

"Indeed I will," she nodded, "It has been well over a century since I last saw my childhood home or my school, but it is a visit I look forward to making."

Harry reached inside his robes and pulled out two pieces of parchment, both of which he handed to Cassandra.

"Do you think you could invisibly pass these on to my friends?" He requested timidly.

She read the names on the front and frowned, "Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger... Weasley, that's an old family isn't it? There was a Weasley, Hugo, who graduated when I was in my third year. But I have never heard of the Grangers."

"She's muggle-born." He explained.

"Ah... The same one you dreamt of when we had our first Occlumency lesson in preparation for future Divination practice?"

Harry blushed beet-red, "Er... yes, she is."

"I see."

Silence overrode anything else they had to say and in the last second, Harry took a tentative step forward and kissed her, his lips exploring hers in a gentle, soothing expression of his feelings. Cassandra kissed him back but soon disentangled herself. Her amber eyes shined brightly, but she didn't say anything more.

"I will see you again, Harry."

"I'll hold you to that."

They smiled at each other and Harry turned to the statue. When the statue had moved to reveal the portal into the muggle world, Harry felt he should say goodbye one last time.

He turned...

...The street was empty; there was no one there but him.

He smirked to himself, "Until next time, Cassandra."

He moved through the portal and disappeared for the night.

Behind a wall of an old building, unseen by anyone, obscured by the nightly shadows stood a beautiful woman with midnight black hair and amber eyes, a travelling robe fastened around her neck and a small suitcase shrunk and placed in her robe-pocket.

"Until next time, Harry."

Author Notes:

1. Hermione probably surprised a lot of you when she gave back her Prefect badge; after all, she's wanted it for ages and everything. But like Ron, this Hermione is being forced to mature far earlier than she did in Canon. She loves rules and authority figures and believes in

them, true... But the reason she does is because she loves what is right above all else. Rules and authority are right in her mind in whatever they do or enforce. But for the first time, the rules and authority figures are not right, they are unjust and malicious and so they no longer have her support. I like this Hermione a lot more and even though I have an inherent distaste for Ron-Hermione pairings, I think these two as more mature individuals can make a believable fit for each other. Although if they will be together is a big question on its own. Let me know if you have any thoughts on her: like her, dislike her, you know the drill.

2. As you can also see Gryffindor House is clearly divided and they are fighting it out big time. This will continue for the foreseeable future. Any suggestions on scenes you'd like played out and such to be placed in a review or PM me and I'll see what I can do, because this House breakdown can have a lot of interesting scenes, even beyond the ones I've planned, so I'm open to suggestions.

3. I like calling it the PA, but Army is so technical and they aren't really his Army in this one, so they are allied to be his supporters. Also I like Potter's Alliance, sounds regal, to me anyway.

4. What's Voldemort going to do next, unfortunately I can tell you off the bat that he is going to lie low for a while, as mentioned in Canon, he barely did anything in the fifth book, his main action started in the sixth one after he was revealed. So that's exactly what he's doing, focusing on Harry and the Prophecy.

5. Has anyone's interest been peaked by Rosier? It was a side plotline that I started that is a sub-story of its own (kind of like Cassandra, but that ultimately grows into the main plot, while this doesn't). Anyway Rosier is going to have a pretty big role in chapters to come and what's up with Dudley? You'll find out soon!

6. Remus and Sirius are caught in the act by Tonks and now she's in on it. But what are they cooking? What's with the overcomplicated, secretive potion and in Sirius' health files? Again, you will know soon enough. That will be out next chapter itself. I've dropped some hints already.

7. I hope you enjoyed the Cassandra scene with Harry, I had to show the two of them coming closer for a variety of reasons in the future and the sex scene was plain fun to write. I hope now you

know why they had sex in the previous chapter, as one reviewer pointed out, "she rode him like a donkey", I really love that line. I know Cassandra's reasoning seems flawed, but she's been around a long time and this has been something that has haunted all this time. Now that she knows she has hope she can't leave till the month is up, so she's a bit angsty, its believable. Plus she's a vampire, she's a bit loony in the head as is expected.

8. All the explanations of Animagi and Divination are entirely AU and pure works of fan-fiction by yours truly.

Any grammatical errors and/or inconsistencies please leave it in a Review or PM me and I'll change it ASAP. Thanks a lot guys!

Yikes this chapter took two and a half months to come out, but at least its here! Finally! Any thoughts you might have on it a re thoroughly appreciated!

Remember REVIEWS make me HAPPY! Its Christmas season, time for giving and all that, GIVE ME REVIEWS, pwetty pwease *puppy-dog eyes*.

The next chapter will have a hell of a lot going on, even more so than my chapters go generally. It's Christmas so I'm giving an extra-long chapter (20,000 words! Or at least that's the aim.)

Next chapter (in a nutshell): The PA in practice, the sacking of Sybil Trelawney through the eyes of her Great-Great-Grandmother, the Trelawney family reunited and deep, forgotten family secrets revealed, HARRY RETURNS TO ENGLAND because something BIG happens and of course its Christmas Time, Rosier has accomplices in unexpected places, the Marauders are getting close to finishing the mystery potion but can Tonks prevent herself from spilling the beans before they do? And last but not the least GASP Are Ron and Hermione finally together? And to top it off action, drama, emotions running high, animagus being achieved, Moody hunting for Harry and A MAJOR CHARACTER DEATH!

Interested? I hope so!

Chapter 5 – Molly Smiles (Lol! This should be a hint.)

I love and thank you all for reading! But for those of you who reviewed, I love you more.

~ Gatonio.

CHAPTER FIVE

MOLLY SMILES

When I come home,

Molly smiles with the dawn,

Molly smiles,

And she radiates the glow around her halo.

When she plays,

Molly smiles

On a summer day,

Molly smiles.

A new day,

Molly smiles.

When the days have gone grey,

Nothing's wrong when Molly smiles.

Molly Smiles ~ Jesse Spencer

Hermione Granger entered the Common Room cautiously. She had gotten into the habit of keeping an eye out for surprise hexes after the first week of school. Seeing few younger years milling about and none of her usual antagonists, she confidently proceeded towards the Common Room fireplace. Seating herself happily in her usual place, she sighed in contentment. It had been ages since she sat by the fireplace without worriedly looking over her shoulder every ten seconds.

It was October second that day and after a full day of classes and several homework assignments later, Hermione was knackered. But as she sat and enjoyed the crackling fire's heat that melted away the

oncoming chill in the air, she couldn't help but grace a small smile on her face. She knew that for the rest of her life, she would never forget this October second.

One might wonder why? The answer was simple: because nothing happened today, absolutely nothing. Hermione laid back in the comfortable red chaise and closed her eyes in contentment, it had been too long since nothing happened: no clandestine meetings of the PA, no impromptu verbal spars with Slytherins who mocked their divisions, Hufflepuffs who scoffed at their House loyalty, Ravenclaws who were chagrined at their stupidity and fellow Gryffindors whose hatred was so ingrained now that the original reasons were moot. There were no hexes exchanged in the corridors, no needless removal of points from Gryffindor's already pathetic score, no glares from Umbridge and looks of disappointment from Flitwick and McGonagall and no sneers from Snape (that was because she didn't have Potions today, but still it counted). The Prefect argument was settled once and for all a week back whereby Parvati would be the girl Gryffindor Prefect permanently because Hermione refused to change her mind and that was made abundantly clear after two months of refusal, Parvati's grades were up to the mark (unlike Sally-Anne whose grades were abysmal at best) and Lavender had proven herself too entrenched in the Gryffindor-Gryffindor rivalry to be trusted with a position of authority within the House. Yet if Parvati ever gave an inkling of abusing her authority she would be removed. There would be no Gryffindor boy Prefect from the fifth year because Harry was gone, Ron and Seamus were banned, Neville refused and Dean's grades were far too lacking for him to be able to handle the position of Prefect simultaneously (he was already in remedial Transfiguration, Potions and Astronomy), so it was decided that there would be two sixth-year boy Prefects.

She sat in the library, did her research on the manipulation of charms, wrote her ten-inch essay on interbreeding of magical and muggle vegetation for Sprout and even got a decent chunk of third-year Runes and Arithmancy revision in-between it all. All in all, a very productive day.

"You seem really pleased." Someone said.

Hermione jumped two feet in the air and had her wand pointed at the interrupter in record time. She then huffed in annoyance when

she saw Ginny standing beside her with her hands held up in surrender and a sly smile on her face.

"Don't surprise me like that, you know how jumpy I get." Hermione chided half-heartedly as she tried to return to her previous relaxed state.

"Well forgive me for caring," Ginny mocked as she flopped down beside Hermione, "But seriously, why all the smiling?"

Hermione released a long-suffering sigh before responding, "If you must know, its because today was a good day, I haven't had such a good day in ages."

Ginny's eyebrows creased in wonder, "Really? I could've sworn you were rolling around laughing at the PA after we filled Umbridge's room with toads that croaked hem hem."

Hermione giggled lightly at the memory, "That's a different kind of happiness. It was vindictive, whereas right now I'm content."

"Anyway," Ginny said waving her wand and erecting a privacy bubble, "any ideas for the next PA meeting, it is your turn after all."

"You needn't worry Ginny, I have a good plan prepared, we'll be working on some skill exercises that Harry was practicing for the Tournament last year before we try some NEWT-level curses I looked up and worked on from the library: a curse to dampen the air around your assailant so the magical discharge of their spells becomes less effective, another one that mimics a dementor's effect, and finally a curse that makes one feel like they're being drowned even though nothing is happening." Hermione informed the redhead.

"More curses," Ginny said excitedly, "Finally! I swear if Neville gave us one more demonstration of a flesh-eating plant that can be calmed with a smack on the head, I might hex someone."

Hermione rolled her eyes at the girl's antics, "Ginny, it wasn't a flesh eating plant, it was a Venomous Fly-Trap and Neville was right that we should know about those because they are very easy to manoeuvre and Grindelwald actually mutated them and used them extensively in land warfare during the Second World War!" She explained.

Ginny's mouth was in a small 'o', "I see you talking Hermione, but all I hear is blah blah blah."

Hermione playfully smacked at the redhead who laughingly brought down the privacy bubble and left her alone to her musings.

Hermione calmed once Ginny had left and allowed herself a rare moment of contemplation. Ginny had been right, the PA had been active in ways that were unimaginable. In the past two months Hermione had broken more school rules than she cared to count. The PA that had started with the most noble of intentions to uphold Harry and all that he believed in, quickly turned into a planning hub of activity to undermine Umbridge at every turn. Umbridge had been on the receiving end of some of the most vicious pranks in Hogwarts history, or so the twins liked to believe as they strutted around confidently. They had humiliated her at every opportunity.

Just this morning they had managed to taint her food so that she stood up during breakfast and announced for all the school to hear that she was infatuated with Minister Fudge and was having a side affair with a picture of him to give him a hint. She then proceeded to perform a strip tease that had been hastily put an end to by Headmaster Dumbledore after her robe had been discarded and the students had been appropriately horrified when they saw all of Umbridge's curves in all the wrong places.

This new prank, part of a whole sleuth initiated by the PA was met with the same mock-glare from the staff and a stern warning from Dumbledore that the ongoing investigation to catch the culprits was gaining momentum. Fred and George were gleeful.

Hermione hummed to herself quietly as she relived some of the more vicious of the pranks that had a lot of her handiwork plastered all over them: the DADA class where she had charmed Umbridge's rear with a sticking charm so that when she sat on her chair, she couldn't get up, but the charm only took effect two hours after class, so she couldn't be traced for it. Hermione had researched that spell well and Dumbledore and Flitwick regretfully informed the Madame that they needed some research time to undo it (research time that lasted a grand total of three days where Umbridge walked around with a chair stuck to her behind).

There was also the time Neville had discovered the use of little crystalline seeds of moonflowers. The seeds were tiny, and they looked exactly like sugar before plantation. Moonflowers were harmless in general, but if ingested in large quantities in a potion, they would cause incurable and unimaginable diarrhoea until they passed from the victim's system, which generally lasted a day. Ginny had been the star of the PA the week she managed to perform a switching spell during one of her Umbridge detentions with Umbridge's large tumbler of sugar with said seeds. For whatever reason, Madame Pomfrey didn't realize that moonflowers were causing this unusual and embarrassing situation for the new Professor and neglected to mention it until Umbridge had returned from St. Mungo's for a second opinion after a week of defecating everything she ate in a matter of minutes. Classes were cancelled all week and Dumbledore had to step in allowing the students to actually learn something useful because Umbridge couldn't get ten feet away from the bathroom without making a return trip.

Of course Collin had started an unexpected friendship with Katie Bell over their mutual appreciation of photography. Collin had been summarily stumped when Katie displayed her prowess at photo editing. The two concocted the most vile pictures of Umbridge in compromising positions with goblins, centaurs, satyrs and there was even one with griffins (all these pictures involved Umbridge with groups of said creatures). They then decided to stick these two-metre by one-metre animated posters all over the Great Hall in the wee hours of the morning so that the whole school was visibly sick at breakfast. Meals were served in the Entrance Hall for the next week because the sticking charm applied was an original, one of many, Weasley-Granger creations that actually got Flitwick excited (more excited than usual that is). The subsequent awarding of fifty points apiece to Fred and George in Charms class for handing out boxes in their next lesson was purely for them being the helpful, rule-abiding students that they were, of course.

Nevertheless, she felt their newest prank would truly hurt Umbridge's pride and maybe she would finally learn never to make a large number of students serve detention simultaneously in her office. Yes, whoever would have thought that the Fidelius could be used in such simple a way?

Yet aside from all the Umbridge-baiting they had been doing, a lot of groundwork had been covered in the PA. At the beginning of every

session they trained for a little over an hour under whoever was in-charge for the day. They learnt more from each other's strengths than they had originally anticipated: Fred had proven himself to be a veritable goldmine of charms knowledge, while George had taught more in potions than Snape ever did, Katie used her superior Runes grades to teach everyone first the basics of the ancient language and then some runes to help in all situations, Angelina was concentrating on flying balance and Alicia on flying manoeuvres. Some of them didn't need much help in that department but for the others like Hermione, Neville, Collin and Dennis, it was a godsend. Neville taught them of every inventive and usable plant imaginable, while Collin and Dennis focussed on spying and stealth (there was a reason Harry could never escape the little snots, they were persistent buggers if nothing else). Ginny had been inclined towards hexing and jinxes for quick hit-and-run scenarios, while Hermione concentrated on heavy-duty spells and curses. Ron was ironically the administrator; his job was managing the schedules for the PA and their meetings' agendas and so on and so forth. He was shockingly good at it as Hermione came to learn, much to her pleasure and surprise.

The second part of the PA session was generally reserved for a review of new prank ideas for Umbridge, both long-term and short. Ron would manage the when's and how's and generally Hermione and the twins would manage the what's with idea inputs from everyone else.

The PA was everything Hermione had hoped it would be: it was efficient, self-contained and ideal. The only thing it lacked was significant membership from non-Gryffindors. Hermione clicked her tongue in disappointment when she remembered the list that Ginny had given her in the first week of school for students to approach from the other houses. Hermione and Ginny had approached them all; the list contained thirty-five names of Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, all of them outright refused. Some denied saying they had familial obligations tied to the Ministry, others were unwilling to be part of anything related to Harry Potter, some were just downright scared to undermine Umbridge at all or in the case of Luna Lovegood, it just wasn't the 'right time' yet. It had been trying to say the least, but in the end, it was all for the best as Hermione doubted that their method of working would have been suitable for a group any larger than they already were.

Perhaps the only upside was the wondrous Room of Requirement that Fred and George had strangely enough discovered entirely by accident. The room provided for everything they needed, including a Quidditch Pitch and broomsticks for Angelina and Alicia's sessions.

The Portrait Hole opened and Hermione saw Lavender come through draped over Seamus' arm, laughing uproariously after something he said. Hermione knew her time of peace had just ended and she needed to get up to her dormitory before Lavender else she'd be counter-jinxing her belongings for ages. Before she left however, she looked carefully to both sides and pulled out her large golden galleon: the means of communication between the small number of PA members. Ron had recently informed her that the next PA session would be on Thursday and she wanted to get the message across quickly. With a quick spell from her wand and a hasty jab and flick, the engravings on the galleon showed the appropriate date and time.

Hermione gathered her bag and left for her room, intent on getting a good night's rest and hoping for a similar day tomorrow.

Unfortunately for her, someone had watched her last action with considerable interest. The man stroked his beard and then disappeared.

"Headmaster!" he called.

Dumbledore was sitting behind his desk working through a mountain of paperwork when he was interrupted by one of the portraits of the late Headmasters and Headmistresses.

"Is something the matter Dionysus?" He asked curiously, looking at the portrait of the aged headmaster dressed in medieval robes with a sword strapped to his side.

"I have managed to uncover the secret of the students that have been revolting against your Professor." He said in a booming voice.

"Excellent, do go on." Dumbledore urged him with a rare twinkle in his eyes.

"They are using galleons Headmaster, ingenious for so common an item to be used in such an uncommon manner." The Headmaster

shook his head in wonder and seemed proud of the feat achieved by his Gryffindors, "They say Gryffindor lacks thinkers, the fools."

"Exceptions Dionysus, that girl is the exception not the rule," Phineus provided snidely.

"Why you scurvy knave! Your corpse will weep from the pain I inflict upon your sorry frame!" The Headmaster all but yelled as he withdrew his sword and ran into Phineus' frame only to be deftly pushed back and knocked out on a table within another painting.

Adjusting his robes, Phineus regarded the current and currently amused Headmaster with a stern look, "Albus, you must put an end to this before they are discovered and nothing can be done to save them from that toad's wrath. The Ministry needs a mere excuse to evict you from Hogwarts at this point and their actions are simply unbecoming of well-behaved students."

Albus looked away sadly and shook his head in the negative, "Stopping them would be counterproductive Phineus, they are the only ones that are capable of inspiring some sort of fear in Dolores and reining her in. I shudder to think how much power she would have amassed at Hogwarts had their little group not been thwarting her image at every given avenue."

He paused as if remembering something, "Some of their ideas are truly ingenious however; the modified sticking charm was confounding on its own and the hallucinogenic effect of crushed Samayan Sunning Wilt Flowers with salt was practically an unheard of discovery."

Phineus slapped his forehead as Dumbledore continued extolling their virtues, "Exactly Dumbledore! They are brilliant students, those twins do the Prewetts proud and that muggle-born, such raw intellect and cunning I have not seen since your days in school. You are allowing them to be expelled and wasting their talent entirely!"

He blushed. "Come now, Phineus. I was hardly as conscientious as Miss Granger in my time, and her teaming up with the Weasley twins against Madame Umbridge is perhaps the scariest occasion I have had to ever imagine."

Phineus chuckled, "No need to be so prideful Dumbledore, you were undoubtedly brilliant, but I am referring to another student during your schooling years. Miss Granger is very oddly reminiscent of her: self-righteous, optimistic, subtly cunning and Gryffindor through and through, but of course I'm sure you didn't know her, she was many years ahead of you." He had a glazed look in his eyes, remembering the good old days of his time as Headmaster.

"Whatever the case maybe," He said suddenly grave again, "Stopping them now is not in the best interest of the school, however I will step in before matters become too out of hand, of that you can be assured Phineus."

His piece said and the portraits of the previous Headmasters and Headmistresses at least temporarily assuaged, Dumbledore returned to his paperwork to decide the appropriation of the woefully lacking Ministry budget for the Greenhouses and Magical Creatures class. He was singing an odd tune while doing so and Phineus' eyes narrowed to slits when he realized that he was more than a little amused and happy at the rule-breaking actions of his Gryffindors.

Madame Umbridge stared intently at the swirling tea in her pretty pink-tinted china. She had just added three teaspoons of sugar after performing copious amounts of checks on her sugar container, her tealeaves and her china. When the sugar seemed entirely dissolved and the tea had the perfect shade of light brown she preferred, she took a tentative sip, pinky pointed outwards like the proper lady she was.

Immediately she placed the cup down and took a deep breath, waiting for something to happen. Feeling no inexplicable desire to defecate, regurgitate or anything else out of the norm, she let out a long breath in relief.

She had imagined things at Hogwarts would be bad, she had expected some opposition to her...techniques, but never ever had she anticipated such outright, dare she say it, rebellion. What made things worse was that the staff gave the little hellions their more than tacit approval for their actions.

Incriminating pictures, embarrassing situations, tainted food and unhelpful onlookers were a deadly combination, but she had not helped her dear Cornelius reach the position of Minister of Magic

without a fair share of scandals and more than a lifetime's worth of cover-ups.

What she needed was power, authority over them all to control them and restrict them. It was no wonder really that Dumbledore had let the school get so out of control and the manner in which she was being targeted was increasingly validating her theory of Dumbledore turning their children against the Ministry.

Yes, it was time, time for drastic measures to be taken. No longer would she allow these schoolchildren to intimidate her! She was the Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic Himself and she deserved, nay, demanded their respect and utter obedience.

She knew there was a reason she hated children so much.

Resolving herself she stood and approached her fireplace. With a pinch of floo powder thrown in she shouted her destination: Minister of Magic's Office.

The fire turned green and she stuck her head in, a maddening twirl assaulted her as she poked herself through, but it was bypassed soon enough when faced with the elaborate and tastefully furnished office of her dear Cornelius.

Fudge was behind his desk working with his head lowered over some piece of parchment or another. She nearly purred seeing him work with such concerted effort and look so dedicated.

"Cornelius," she said in what she thought was her sultry voice but only managed to scare the poor bulbous man and make him jump when he saw her face in the fireplace.

"Dolores? Have things at the school improved at all? Anything further to report on Dumbledore?" He asked waddling towards the fireplace and bending down to face his employee.

"Nothing new to report I'm afraid, but matters are getting entirely uncontrollable on my end Cornelius. I think it is time that we revealed the news." She nodded resolutely.

"Certainly Dolores, I'll floo the Prophet now and have them run it up as the cover for tomorrow." He assured her.

She smiled sweetly and blew him a small kiss that flustered Fudge as she withdrew her head from the fireplace.

Revelling in her newfound power, she excitedly returned to her chair and picked up her tea drinking the entire cup in one go.

She then lifted a delicious crumpet and bit into it.

She could see the title of the Prophet now, 'Dolores Umbridge: greatest Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts and High Inquisitor of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry'. As the High Inquisitor, she would see that these terrible and vicious pranks ended once and for all and implicate those Weasleys and that Granger girl she knew was behind it all. Why if she could just get her hands on th—

GLURRRRP!

Her eyes snapped to the odd and yet terrifyingly familiar sound made by her stomach and she looked at the sugar tumbler distastefully, banishing it angrily before making a mad dash to her bathroom attached to her office knowing what was coming next.

Except... she couldn't remember where her bathroom was! She knew she had one, Merlin knew she had spent enough time in there, but where was it?

Looking around frantically she was rapidly losing control of her bowels and she could feel her recently eaten dinner head southwards at an alarming pace, the closest bathroom was on the floor below and she would never get there in time!

Eyes roaming her office at a maddening pace she found her dustbin. Grabbing the tiny container with both hands, she placed it between her legs, taking off her robe; she raised her skirt and bent down to relieve herself.

Seething and fuming, she heard the systematic plop sounds as her dinner exited her body and was deposited in her dustbin. All her little cats in their plates and pictures were hissing angrily and some were so disgusted they disappeared from their frames.

She really, really hated children!

That morning was different, there was no exchange of insults between Gryffindors this morning, Malfoy and his goons kept their distance and even Umbridge had been given a reprieve from constant pranking. The reason that everything was so wound down was the simplest of all: it was Monday.

That day, students were dragging their feet with a little more exaggeration, they were eating their food with a little less relish and their eyes were just that little bit harder to keep open. Nobody wanted to let go of the weekend past of rising at noon and lazing around all day, but they had to because the new school week had begun; however balefully, they accepted this every Monday morning.

A student with long bushy curls and a large grin that screamed 'morning person' plopped down beside him.

"Good morning Ron!" She said in a happy tone.

In reality, her tone wasn't happier or different than her tone on any other morning of the week, but this was Monday for Merlin's sake! For all her intelligence, she never managed to grasp the significance of this very dreaded morning and the need for quiet and lack of preparedness.

Therefore in response to her cheery disposition, Ron grunted into his eggs and looked at his plate, causing the girl to raise her brows in consternation and shrug nonchalantly.

"I just don't understand your problem with Mondays." She muttered under her breath.

He groaned again, he raised his left hand that was precariously pointed towards another member of their House with similar coloured hair, "Ginny!"

"What!" She snapped back in an instant, her eyes bleary and her shoulders tense.

"Hermione is pissing on Mondays again." He grumbled, not having the energy to comment on her tone.

"Language Ron!" Hermione chided more as a reflex than anything else.

It was a testament to the resilience of Monday mornings that he couldn't quite muster the energy to retort to that last comment with anything more than a grunt.

Ginny released a long sigh and looked at her with droopy eyes and a tired expression, "We've talked about this Hermione. You lay off on Monday mornings."

She huffed, "I don't see why? It's the beginning of a new week; you have to start it off well if you want to maximize your efficiency during the rest of the week. Besides there's nothing wrong with being a little cheery, this is a school of magic after all."

There was a resounding sound of hoot as a parliament of owls came streaming through the Great Hall drafters with the morning mail. Hermione watched their progress avidly, waiting for the one that would come deliver her copy of the morning's Prophet. She wanted to see if there were any more shocks in store for them since the Umbridge High-Inquisitor debacle.

A medium-sized nondescript brown owl landed in front of her with the aforementioned newspaper and Hermione gingerly deposited the required funds in its little pouch. She then took her copy of the Prophet and began browsing through; looking for anything interesting that might catch her eye.

"Anything interesting?" Ginny asked at a lower decibel than usual.

She shook her head in the negative while absently biting into an apple.

He was relaxed again when Hermione's attention was poured over something other than him. He was peacefully eating his breakfast when he saw another, slightly larger, tawny-blackish owl flap its feathers and land in front of Hermione.

He didn't give it any thought and all was well for the next few minutes as Hermione retrieved her mail and went through it.

"Ron!" She practically hissed, causing him to jump involuntarily when she smacked his arm, her eyes never leaving the parchment.

"What?" He grumbled.

"Come with me, this is important!" Her tone brooked no argument and he followed her out of the Great Hall with a piece of toast nursed in his napkin that he was nibbling on to keep himself occupied, lest he say something that would devolve into a fight.

From the Entrance Hall, she led him to the side and into a broom closet behind the Grand Staircase.

He was very curious now and, though he wouldn't ever admit it, a bit nervous as well.

"H-Hermione?" He questioned.

She looked at him with a calculating gaze and handed him her letter.

He took it from her grasp and smoothed out the clearly muggle paper before commencing reading:

Dear 'Mione,

How are you dear? Your father and I have some exciting news, we've decided to maraud the newest dental conference in search of the perfect assistants and some new machines. We will be out of town for some time, but I swear your father is turning into a handful these days.

We just wanted to let you know that and we love you, be good.

Mum.

He looked at her quizzically, "So your parents are going out for a bit, do you want the Order to give them protection or something?"

She bit her lip, "That wasn't a letter from my Mum, neither of them call me 'Mione', in fact they hate calling me anything but my entire name - they've said so on multiple occasions. Also look at the word choice in the letter Ron, 'maraud', 'swear', 'be good'."

He thought about it for a few seconds and his eyes widened when the implication set in, "Are you saying that Harry..."

His statement just hung and she nodded resolutely, "Well what do you think he's trying to tell us? This note is awfully cryptic."

He smiled, he withdrew his wand and she slapped her forehead in understanding, "Of course! I can be so daft sometimes."

He just shrugged, "Its alright Hermione, the rare times that you don't catch onto something before everyone else - it makes the rest of us feel human."

She slapped his arm with a mock-angry 'prat'.

He tapped the letter with his wand and announced, "I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good."

The letter flashed with a little light and then tore into two pieces of parchment. Hermione bent down and picked them up, she handed one to him and began reading the other.

He looked at his letter and peered at the handwriting, it was definitely Harry's.

Hey Ron,

I hope you're doing well and everyone in your family as well. Things here are better than ever. I've been learning so much Ron; I can't even begin to tell you. There's such a huge world out there beyond Hogwarts, beyond the tiny bubbles we live in, it's just fascinating to see the world a little more, one place at a time.

I wrote to tell you two that I'm fine, very much alive and healthy and missing you two a lot. This is the first time I've started a huge adventure without you two by my side and well, its different and a bit weird.

Hopefully, I'll be home soon, but not anytime in the near future the way I see it.

Harry.

He couldn't help it; a small smile did creep onto his lips.

"Any idea where he is?" Hermione asked curiously.

He looked up from his letter, "Not a definite location but he is certainly outside of England. By the sounds of things, I think he's been doing a fair bit of travelling."

"Really?" She asked, "Mind if I read your letter?"

"Sure." He shrugged and the two exchanged letters.

He looked into the same messy scrawl but this time addressed to Hermione.

Dear Hermione,

Where do I begin? I guess I should start with an apology for just disappearing on you two without so much as a goodbye. But if you look at it from my perspective, it's not like you gave me much choice over the summer. Since I've left, I've done a lot of thinking and I guess, looking at the situation from a detached perspective, I understand your reluctance to go over Dumbledore's word and write to me anyway. I probably would have done the same in your place; I was just aggravated being left at Privet Drive all by my lonesome is all.

Anyway, things here are quite amazing, you would be so proud by all the things I'm learning. There's just so much more to see and understand in this world and even though I've barely scratched the surface, it still feels like so much.

I wish you were here with me Hermione, you would have loved it I'm sure and Ron would've complained a lot but come along for the ride anyway.

Don't worry about me, I'll pass on a letter whenever I can and wherever I am, I will be fine and missing you two.

Love,

Harry.

He looked away from the letter and saw her looking at him with a glazed look.

"What?" He asked self-consciously.

That snapped her out of her stupor and she blushed lightly, "Um... nothing, we should tell Dumbledore."

"Yeah..." He agreed with a hint of suspicion.

She walked out of the broom closet and he just stood there.

"Well come on!" She called back and he immediately followed her out.

Sixteen years, sixteen long years and this is what they had all amounted to.

With a loud thump Filch dropped the last of her baggage beside her. She looked around confusedly, her mind still dazed and rattled by the events that had unfolded at such an alarming pace. The cold of the evening was closing in and she wrapped her arms around herself as she unsteadily sat down on one of her trunks, her eyes unwaveringly staring at the horrid woman who had done this to her.

"Y-you can't d-do this to me," She said pleadingly, "For sixteen years, H-Hogwarts has been my home, it is where I belong."

Large tears began accumulating in her eyes and they were slowly falling down her face. She was so shocked she barely registered the throng of students that had crowded around her and were unabashedly staring at her woeful predicament.

Dolores Umbridge regarded her with pity, but her eyes betrayed her mirth, she inspected her pink glove covered hand and answered crisply, "I'm terribly sorry Madame Trelawney, but your services are no longer required at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. You simply do not meet Ministry standards."

Another sob racked her frame, as her large glasses were askew by her constant shivering, the cold was getting worse, she was rubbing her arms for heat and another fear gripped her through her haze of disbelief, "I have n-nowhere to go, please, please don't do this..."

She was begging, she was willing to grovel, but she could not leave Hogwarts.

Dolores sighed pityingly, "Deary it is just the way it is, you will have to leave or will be made to."

A strangled moan was heard and it took a second for Sybil to realize it was coming from her, she no longer attempted to hide her tears, as they flowed down her cheeks in earnest.

A large hand rested on her shoulder and steadied her, she flinched back in fear thinking they were going to force her to leave, "Argus, kindly take the Professor's belongings back to her Quarters."

With visible relief, Sybil cried and sobbed into the Headmaster's robes, "Oh thank you Albus, thank you so much."

She felt his large hand pat her back assuring her and even though her face was buried in the Grand Sorcerer's robes, she could feel the daggers being thrown in her direction by Umbridge.

She then felt Minerva slowly guide her and she latched onto the stern Transfiguration Professor, still unable to control her unending bawling, sobs were freely shaking her and McGonagall held her tightly and muttered soothingly into her ears as she was led away.

She didn't hear the rest of the argument that she knew would play out between the Headmaster and that wretched woman; she didn't think she had the strength to. She knew though that no one would be making her leave again, Dumbledore was standing by her side.

McGonagall walked her all the way to her lonesome Tower and then helped her up the stairs. She settled her down on her old couch in her quarters and held her till she stopped crying.

Slowly, steadily, her tears gave way and before she knew it, she was asleep in the embrace of the Professor that had disliked her from the day she moved into Hogwarts.

Perhaps hours had passed when her eyes opened, but she found herself in her bedclothes, safely ensconced in her bedroom under her warm duvet that she had packed this morning. A warm plate of

food was on a trolley beside her and an elf popped into existence as soon as she noticed it.

She jumped in surprise and the elf bowed deeply, "Mipsy is sorry for scaring yous Madame, Prof'ssor Dumblydoor tells Mipsy to leave dinner for yous and tell yous that if yous be needing anything, he be there."

She could only nod silently and the elf bowed again and popped away.

Sighing, she sat back in bed, it had been close that day, she nearly lost everything, but Dumbledore had protected her and saved her from the clutches of that woman! She thought she would start crying again, but knew she had exhausted her tears.

"That was quite a scene today." Came an elegant observation from her immediate right.

Sybil once again jumped a metre in the air and turned to her side with large, fearful eyes. Lying beside her, sprawled in her bed was a woman she had never seen before, she had long black hair and her face was obscured by the shadows in the room. Despite the dark, her large amber eyes were shining through.

"Wh-who are you? Are you here to take me away?" She asked grappling for her wand while the woman looked at her with unmasked pity, "I'll have you know Dumbledore won't let you do this!"

"Ease yourself Sybil, I am here to meet you and I feel I have the right to do so." Said the scary woman now looking away and inspecting her room carefully.

She got off her bed and began noting her reflection in the nearby mirror.

"You seem a bit old to be a student, I don't think I've ever taught you. W-who are you?" She tried again.

The woman tsked lightly and turned around to face her with anger evident in her eyes, "You have been masquerading as a Seer and

gaining creditability for being one because you are supposedly the great-granddaughter of Cassandra Trelawney, the celebrated Seer."

Her back arched and she looked at the woman with rage, a hint of fear still present, "I'll have you know I am a Seer and Cassandra was my great-grandmother."

The woman crossed her hands and stared at her with detached amusement, "Really, then why is it you do not have an ounce of Trelawney blood running through your veins?"

She gulped, the woman seemed undeterred and utterly convinced in her assessment. She could not understand how this had unravelled; it was kept secret. Observing the unwavering surety of the mysterious woman in front of her, she knew she had been found out.

"I'll tell you everything," she said fearfully, "But first tell me who you are."

The woman straightened and dramatically tossed her long hair behind her back, "I am a vampire of Clan Sierra in Vladivostok, when I lived as a witch my name was Cassandra Trelawney."

She was frozen in place as her words registered, "I see."

That day was definitely the worst day of her life.

Cassandra amiably sat in a cushy armchair to the far left of the room. She wanted, nay, she needed to know the truth. At that point, she was just so exhausted of having her emotions played with that nothing but the pure unvarnished truth could sate her.

She had arrived in Hogsmeade in the first week of October and spent a month gathering as much information as she could on Sybil Trelawney and the local news in the area. What she found astounded her. Lord Voldemort returned and the Ministry in denial and this high-profile Ministry woman strutting around as Hogwarts' new High Inquisitor. It was a sad day when an old and revered institution like Hogwarts was reduced to such levels.

Never once though did she let the troubles of the tides affect her, she was no longer a witch and she was no longer worried about the

matters of wizard kind. She was here to meet her only surviving progeny.

The vampire had waited for a month, surrounding Hogwarts at all times and learning as much as she could about the wards, they were truly marvellous, Hogwarts was one of the safest places in the world. She had fast come to realize that had she wanted, she could easily bypass them and enter because most of the wards were geared towards being those of a fortress. A fortress fends from armies, not from individuals. But she chose to bide her time; she waited because she knew that if the rumours were true then her great-granddaughter would not be teaching for very long.

It saddened her to realize that her progeny was considered a fraud, but Harry had assured her that she did possess some skill; she was merely unaware of the nuances of Divination. With the correct training, she could become a formidable Seer someday. That is why she fervently hoped to meet her after she left Hogwarts, entice her with promises of a real Divination education and spirit her away from all the carnage that was to befall Hogwarts.

The Headmaster had foiled her plans. He had taken her back and she was at the end of her patience. She decided to meet her progeny that night by hook or by crook.

When she entered the North Tower and into her Quarters, she was elated. But as her feet touched the ground and her lungs breathed the air, she knew something was wrong, so greatly wrong. Her Sight showed her something was amiss and Cassandra acted upon instinct.

She performed a heavy sleeping charm on the already sleeping Divination Professor, and then she proceeded to slit her arm and gathered a few drops of blood. Pouring some of her own blood into a conjured bowl, Cassandra performed a ceremony of the Old Rites. If the two blood samples combined then the people in question were directly related, if they did not however, then there was no relation whatsoever between the involved parties.

She had been distraught when her blood did not mingle Sybil's. She needed to know the truth.

She regarded the woman with a keen eye, inspecting and judging every part of her. Her hair was messy, her robes frayed, her face pale and plain. She did not possess the aristocracy that made the Trelawneys famous; she did not even have the innate eccentric grace that they were famed for. This...specimen...could not be her descendent.

"I am waiting Sybil." Cassandra gently reminded her with an undertone of a threat.

The ex-Divination Professor flinched at her words and nodded enthusiastically, "Well, I was... a magical orphan. Nicholas Trelawney III and his wife Mary adopted me from a German orphanage where I was born to a witch. They raised me as their own."

Her eyes seemed to drift back to memories long forgotten and Cassandra's haughty expression softened as she realized that this woman was related to her, in one way or another.

"You were adopted?" She asked disbelievingly.

She nodded sadly, "I did not know until my seventeenth birthday when Mum told me. But even though I was not their child by blood, I was their child by magic."

The vampire flinched. "You mean...?"

She looked away, "There is a reason I am eccentric, a reason I am not always 'there', father performed the ceremony when I was a newborn. Magic of such a violent nature can do things to hamper a child's mental growth. But the ritualistic ceremony worked and I became a Trelawney in all ways but blood."

The Ritual of Magical Adoption was a dangerous ceremony that had originally been created by magical vampires - ironically enough. It was a little known fact in the magical world because vampires needed it to sire heirs since they could not reproduce. The ceremony was only known in the wizarding world by the oldest of families who performed the ceremony in cases of desperation to keep the family magic alive. Cassandra herself had considered performing it but never came through because she knew that any heir she sired would be a replacement for her lost Nicholas and no

heir deserved that. But the ceremony was dangerous to perform on those too young; a newborn baby would be permanently addled by such sorcery tempering their minds and bodies to accept a family and all its hereditary magic.

"That picture over there," the sad witch pointed to the one on the other side of her bed, "It's the only one I have left of the three of us together. They were killed in a Death Eater raid on Hogsmeade in the late seventies."

With shaking hands, the subdued vampire summoned the picture to herself. She peered at it closely and observed the face of the young man with a stern expression tempered with a sense of lightness by his doting wife's head on his shoulder and their child, a mere baby, resting on his lap.

He looks so much like Nicholas, she thought sadly, those eyes and that expression.

Blood appeared in her eyes and it was falling down her cheeks. She wasn't sure how long she stayed like that without moving, but it was definitely a significant amount of time because Sybil cleared her throat uneasily and garnered her attention.

"I know it's a lot to digest," she explained sadly, "But if you really are who you say you are, then I'm more than a little curious about how you came to be the way you are. The circumstances surrounding your death were always mysterious."

She looked away sadly, wiping her tears in the process, "I'd rather not discuss that."

"So... does this mean you're my great-grandmother by magic?" She asked hopefully.

She looked at her sadly but shook her head in the negative, "The ceremony of which you speak is called the Ritual of Magical Adoption. When performed by wizards, it is considered a Light ritual. I am a vampire, a creature whose soul is damned eternally. My magic and my essence is Dark. When this ceremony was performed it only transferred magic from both lines that was Light, from wizards and witches that were still living or died as such. I was erased from

your history entirely. You are related to the rest of the Trelawneys by magic, except me..."

"Oh..." The witch said sadly and curled up into herself, "So I am not your great-granddaughter."

"I am afraid not." She concurred, mirroring her disappointment.

"But then why am I a Seer?" She asked her eyes snapping to her.

The aged vampire considered her question with a thoughtful expression, "I think... I think in you, because of the ceremony, there was an over-concentration of Trelawney magic and it reawakened the abilities of the long deceased Trelawney Seers." As she spoke the theory made more and more sense, "Sybil, you aren't a Seer, you are an Oracle!"

"Wha...?" She asked startled.

"When I married into the Trelawney line," She explained, "the magic of the Sight was running out, they thought by infusing my well-known Seer genes with their own, it would reignite. Of course it never worked because the Trelawneys were never Seers, they were Oracles, and my magic infused with theirs caused a battle between the Seers and Oracles in their magic and resulted in a stalemate, making it infinitely more difficult to manifest the Sight, until you..."

"...Because you were erased from my magical adoption entirely." Sybil put the pieces together.

She acceded with tristesse, "Exactly."

"Well, its good to know someone believes in me, even though I think I'm a fraud." She said laughingly.

"You're not a fraud." She said with conviction.

"I am." She nodded humourlessly, "If I wasn't, that horrible woman would have never had the opportunity to kick me out, but she did."

"You are untrained Sybil, you are an untrained Oracle and therefore do not remember your own prophecies." She explained lightly.

Sybil just shrugged, her legs pulled up to her chest and her hair a mess.

"If you wish," she began cautiously, "I have an Oracle friend, she is the current Oracle of Delphi in Greece. She could teach you Sybil, everything you need to know."

She considered this, "Why would you do this for me?"

She smiled sadly, "You are my adoptive great-granddaughter and had I not been eternally damned, you would be so by magic. It is the least I could do."

She smiled tentatively in response, "Thank you Cassandra, I just wish there was something I could do..."

Her eyes shot wide open and her mouth was gaping, "Of course!"

Cassandra was wary of this response. She watched her shoot out of bed and dig her hands underneath the bed, pulling out an old metal box. She pried the cover open with her bare hands and began ruffling through several old parchments and photographs. Quickly getting frustrated with her attempts, Sybil picked up her wand and summoned whatever she was looking for to herself. She then presented the picture to Cassandra.

Cassandra accepted it gently and eased out the old photograph, the magic that made it animate had long ago faded and it was reminiscent of a muggle photograph now. Two people stood side by side. One was definitely her grandson Nicholas, much younger than the previous picture and beside him, a girl who looked nearly a decade younger, probably at Hogwarts the time the picture was taken. She stood in a stoic manner that reminded Cassandra strongly of her own mother, her lips were pulled into a half-smile, but what stood out the most were her two bright amber eyes.

"Who is this girl?" Cassandra asked in a whisper.

She answered, "She's your granddaughter, my Aunt."

"Where is she?" She nearly choked on her words.

"She disappeared," She answered sheepishly, "She worked for the Ministry in a high-ranking capacity, she was married briefly to Arcturus Black, but she never returned after a mission in the Grindelwald War. That's why my parents were in Germany in 1955 when they adopted me. They were searching for her, or at least, searching to find out what happened to her. Why she never returned."

There was a long pause and neither knew what to say next.

"What was her name?" She asked unconsciously running a finger over her lost granddaughter's head.

"Is," She corrected as she sat down on the bed and gave Cassandra some space, "We never knew if she died and she didn't work as a member of the Department of Mysteries for nothing. If she didn't want to be found, she wouldn't be. For all we know, she's alive somewhere."

With renewed hope burning in her eyes, Cassandra asked, "What is her name?"

The witch smiled, a hint of tears in her eyes.

"Cassandra Agnes Trelawney."

He really didn't like the spot he had picked. It was dark and more than a bit shadowy. By all accounts, his station was creepy without a fault. But he behaved like the good, upstanding, honest man he was and he continued to mind his station without complaint. After all, dark times lay ahead and complaining about the literal darkness of his current holdout was hardly brave. Perhaps for the first time in years, he had to call upon his Gryffindor courage to hold himself in position and do the job he was assigned to do.

Like all boring, mindless duties that people have to fulfil in their lifetimes, he spent the time getting distracted and reminiscing. After all, you could only stare off into darkness while staying alert for so long. He remembered all the good times and he remembered some of the bad as well.

Sighing he leaned against the wall as he was reminded yet again, why doing his part was necessary. He had been party to a blood,

horrible war that ended abruptly giving them a thirteen-year reprieve. But now it was back in full-force and all he could do was make sure that he helped end the war soon enough before his children joined the fray.

That was his greatest fear and ultimate weakness: his children. The thought of even a scratch on them, those whom he had reared and brought up from their infancy, it made his blood boil.

They say love is a fickle thing; it blows like the wind from one direction to another. One can forsake their friends and acquaintances, they can turn their backs on their cousins and aunts and uncles. Some go so far as to walk away from their parents. But if there is love, it can never be greater than the love that exists in a parent for his child. That is true love.

It was with this grim determination that the somewhat portly, mild-mannered man with a balding head of red hair stood a little bit taller.

It's sad really, that no matter how noble one's intentions, however pure his ideals, he gets caught in the miasma of habit and distraction; he lets his guard down.

There's a reason the legendary Auror Mad-Eye Moody constantly claims the necessity of CONSTANT VIGILANCE. It's not just meant to be a catchy slogan for him. It's a philosophy to live by in times of war. When you lose grasp of this philosophy, be careful, you might lose grasp on life.

He was a good man, who stood up for his family and the Light, he was a Gryffindor through and through. His lack of vigilance caused him to miss the appearance of a greyish-black snake that moved with ethereal grace and silence. His musings resulted in the dismissal of the slight 'hissing' sound in the area to be nothing more than his mind playing tricks on him. His distraction to gather his bearings made for his ultimate mistake.

The snake coiled around his body, he reacted violently and slashed his wand at the offending reptile. Its oddly coloured skin was resistant to his quick spells. He did not think to use a curse, he merely thought of escape. The snake bit his hand, his hand that held his wand. It clattered on the ground as the snake continued its journey coiling around its poor victim.

He stood there immobilized as he felt the snake's mouth inch towards his neck. With one last shudder, the snake plunged its fangs and created a puncture wound, injecting its deadly venom in all its glory.

He breathed in sharply, the poison paralyzed his body; the snake was taking its time biting into parts of his flesh with its fangs.

He began losing lucidity from time to time. He didn't even realize when the snake had uncoiled itself from his body and he had slumped to the floor. He didn't equate the red liquid forming a puddle around him was his own blood.

He stayed there, lying in his own bloody pool, gasping for breath as the venom seeped into his veins and poisoned him. His flesh turned a pasty white, his pallid complexion in sharp contrast to the healthy pink it had been just this morning.

As he lay there, convulsing and writhing, he saw flashes in his mind's eye. He didn't see his life go by, he didn't see his death or the afterlife. He saw himself holding his oldest son Bill outside of the St. Mungo's waiting room. He saw the day six-year-old Charlie waved excitedly when he caught his first snitch. He saw the day his estranged son Percy came bursting into his room triumphantly unveiling his Prefect badge. He saw Fred, his head bent over a cauldron, mirthful eyes speckled with concentration. He saw George waving around his mother's wand, pretending to do the charms he saw his mother do everyday. He saw Ron standing tall and proud when he picked him up at King's Cross after his first year. He saw Ginny, vibrant and beautiful, giving him a kiss one morning before he headed for work.

There is no love truer than that of a parent to his child. But sometimes, a love like no other, a bond second to none is formed between two people, two people so desperately in love that it hurts to be apart.

He breathed in sharply when he saw his wife, lovely Molly, walk down the aisle in her pristine white dress, a bouquet in hand and a large smile on her face. He saw every eye in the gallery watch her, himself included, but she only had eyes for him, eyes that sparkled with love.

He coughed and wheezed as the pain intensified, his body began shutting down.

"F-Forg-give....me....Mol-ly..."

He exhaled one last breath and then with a shudder and a wheeze, he breathed no more.

Arthur Weasley was dead.

"Concentrate Harry!" The Amanta snapped as Harry's eyed slammed shut once again and he tried to block out the pain.

Everyone always talked about how cool it would be to be an animagus, nobody ever mentioned how painful it was to become one. There was no meditation, no potion, no spell, nothing.

Your animagus teacher transfigured various parts of your body, generally hands, to see if you could transmute back, or change something in the form if only by the littlest bit. For ages, Cassandra kept changing his left hand to a hoof and Harry would just stare dispassionately at it, not having any inkling to be near it or feel it in any way. It felt like an alien piece of flesh had lodged itself on his body.

Towards the third week of September, Cassandra had accidentally turned his leg to that of a wolf's hind during a mock duel. For the first time, that animal part felt somewhat correct. Slowly, they uncovered the large paw that felt right at home to Harry and he managed to change the paw back to his hand with enough effort exerted, leaving him winded for the rest of the evening.

Now the Amanta was continuing his training, she was extensively teaching him the need to conserve his strength when changing to and from his animal.

Of course it sounds all fine when you discuss the theory, but when you get down to the practical, the real pain begins. Each ligament, nerve end and bone is twisted and bent out of shape and back, over and over again in an endless cycle and Harry felt it. No matter what they say in the books, the pain of transmutation does not lessen with successive attempts at self-transfiguration.

Yet in the past nearly three months, Harry had diligently worked on his animagus form, he had conscientiously practiced everything the Amanta told him to as he changed his hand to a paw and back, soon he did both hands simultaneously without breaking a sweat. That was in the third week of October.

Now it was nearing Christmas, and he, for the first time, was attempting a full body transmutation into his animagus form with the Amanta standing by.

It hurt, a lot. He agonized over each and every second as his body began a change most unfathomable. He howled as his spine twisted and bent forcing him to his hands and knees. His hands spouted claws and soon turned into their customary paws. His legs bent inwards and he mewled pathetically as he heard the audible snap of the bones. His nose began knitting new cartilage and he felt as if someone had chained him to a wall and was then pulling him forward, nose-first. It elongated in grotesque ways and right at the edge began pulling the skin back over his nostrils to form a large snout. His cream-like, white skin with only the hint of hair through puberty began spouting large tufts of fur and covered his frame. His glasses, long fallen off his elongated nose, were no longer necessary as he felt the sockets of his eyes be pulled wider and his eyes become sharper. His ears felt like they were being pulled in every direction. His teeth were subjected to a pain that could make any dentist blush, as they were grinded and reshaped entirely.

Just as soon as it started, it was over. The pain of transmutation left him more than winded and he had the uncomfortable need to want to hurl. Thrown on the ground pathetically, he felt his bones ache and his breath was ragged.

"Well done Harry." The Amanta said satisfactorily.

She waved her wand and conjured a full-length mirror.

He pushed his head up and tiredly looking in, his excitement to finally see his mysterious form overriding any and all exhaustion at that point. His big beady eyes, looked blearily into the reflecting surface. There, he saw a large, shaggy black dog, highly reminiscent of The Grim. He bared his teeth and saw his new, large,

sharper collection. He sniffed himself and knew he wasn't mistaken; this was his form. Without a doubt, he was the dog.

The Amanta stood back and allowed him to acclimate himself to this new version, when she felt enough time had elapsed; she vanished the mirror and stood in front of him.

"Prepare yourself Harry, this is going to be messy."

With that, Harry the dog braced himself, his claws digging into the soft carpet on the floor as the most excruciating pain after the Cruciatus known to wizard kind assaulted him for the second time that day.

When the pain subsided, he stayed on the ground, unaware that tears were running down his eyes. The Amanta sat down beside him, her tiny frame virtually non-existent to his blurry vision.

She gingerly put his glasses back on his face and he breathed a sigh of relief.

"You have done well; achieving an entire animagus transmutation is one of the most painful experiences that one goes through in a life time. It is generally discouraged for those below the age of seventeen to embark upon this venture because of the serious pain that it can cause and all the potential for disaster if not properly supervised. With a little more practice, your body will be suitably comfortable with the animal magic and then it will be near-instantaneous and will not hurt at all." She explained while stroking his sweat-dampened hair.

She placed a vial of pepper-up potion beside him and advised him to drink it when he felt up to it.

"You're done for the day. I will see you tomorrow - we will be consolidating your efforts with advanced Transfiguration and basic Conjuraton. I must say Harry, that though you struggled with Enchantments, you really have a gift for Transfiguration. I've scarcely seen that before." She got up and headed towards the garden.

"Amanta?" He gasped out.

"Yes Harry?" She stopped and looked at his prone form.

"Cassandra mentioned that your animagus form is hereditary, that it is a proven fact that a child inherits their parent's form if only one has one. My mother didn't have a form and my father was a stag. Yet I am a Grim-like dog." He explained in a neutral voice.

The Amanta seemed unconcerned, "Often-times Harry, even though one parent has an animagus form, the child receives a different one, the reason behind that is that the other parent also has a form, but never discovered it. Seeing as your mother never had the opportunity to work on it, it is a reasonable guess that it was her form that you inherited."

"That's what Cassandra inferred originally as well... but..."

"But what Harry?" The Amanta asked cautiously.

"But my form is exactly like my godfather's. Could I have inherited his?" He voiced his underlying fear.

"That's...impossible." The Amanta mused, "Will you be meeting your godfather anytime again?"

"Perhaps one day, soon." He mused.

"When you do, ask him, I have a feeling only he has an answer to this question." She paused and considered her next words, "but I think you should prepare yourself for an unsavoury revelation about your mother."

"How do you mean?" He asked a hard edge to his tone.

"Do not be cross with me Harry, I am simply stating the most obvious answer, which is that your godfather may actually be your father."

With that last piece of advice, the Amanta walked out and left Harry to stew over this latest shock.

Green bubbles came floating from the cauldron as Harry stirred conscientiously in perfect concentric circles eight times clockwise followed by three anticlockwise turns from the six o'clock mark. He

had to continue this till the acid green, bubbling liquid in front of him turned into a calm and pale blue.

It was at times like this that he allowed his mind to wander, when he contemplated on the many shocks and unbelievable twists that described his life. The latest being his questionable parentage. Could it be that Sirius was his father? But how would that make sense? Everyone who had ever known his parents always commented that he looked like a spitting image of his father, James Potter! But even more cumbersome, was imagining the thought that his mother was one of those women.

Having grown up an orphan in a household that despised his mere existence, Harry had created an idyllic version of his parents. No matter how much his relatives falsely cursed them of being layback drunks, he knew in some part of his heart that they weren't, that they were great people, that they changed lives and meant the world to others, that he was the apple of their eye and that they loved him dearly. Then he met Hagrid who stood up to his Uncle in all his seven-foot glory and defended James and Lily Potter as the greatest Head Pupils and warriors of the Light. All subsequent questions of his parents had yielded similar responses... well except from Snape (but he doesn't count).

But now...

Now he didn't know what to believe. Would it be like his mother to lie to his father, the man she had sworn to love and married? Would it be like her to perform the ultimate form of betrayal with none other than her husband's best friend? Then to go ahead and name him as the godfather of her child – his child. Would it be like her to take the secret of his parentage to her grave? Was there a reason his Aunt reviled her the way she did? Did Sirius even know the truth? Or was there another outlandish explanation to it all? What kind of a woman was Lily Potter?

His breathing eased out as he refocused his attention on the cauldron, the green had now settled into a calm blue, textbook perfect. Harry was about to finish the twentieth clockwise-anticlockwise stir, when he tilted his head and looked at the cauldron carefully, he observed the directions and reactions of the potion.

After the first eight clockwise turns, he saw the potion settle into a deep blue, as he started the anticlockwise turns, it turned deeper, Harry stopped after the second anticlockwise and then switched to a clockwise stir. The potion vacillated between deep blue and pale blue. After alternating every two clockwise turns with an anticlockwise one, he found the potion had turned bluer than before, bluer than even the recipe.

"My word," Stefan said coming into the Lab and observing Harry's efforts as he bottled it up, "Is that the Nerve-Rejuvenation potion I had you working on?"

Harry nodded absently, his thoughts still astray.

"How did you get it so blue?" He leaned in and smelled the potion cautiously and then broke into a huge grin, "I would say the potency of the potion has gone up by an impressive ten percent! This is outstanding work Harry!"

Harry just shrugged a small smile on his lips, "I try. I wrote down the changes I made, in case it turned into a disaster like my other attempts and you wanted to point out my mistakes."

Stefan clicked his tongue in mock-annoyance at the boy's teasing tone and read over the small changes in the end, "Yes, yes, I see what you've done here Harry. I think I want you to try this potion again, but use your instinct the entire time, change it any manner you see fit. I think you're well on your way towards your first improved potion."

He nodded in response and headed towards the supplies on another table, gathering the basic ingredients he knew he would need. He returned and began chopping up what needed to be chopped up and so on and so forth.

There was a bell chime, which indicated the arrival of a new customer. Stefan left him to his work and told him that he would call on him if he were needed at the front. As part of Stefan's tutelage, Harry helped out at the old Potions' Master's shop. He aided customers in understanding the uses of various potions if Stefan was busy brewing at the time. Of course, Stefan being one of the only two people in Romania (he was certain Cassandra was no longer in Romania), who knew the secret of his identity, referred to

him by an acceptable pseudonym of 'James' when in company of customers to maintain his façade.

He seemed to be holding a subdued conversation with the customer, by the sounds of it, a regular.

"James, bring up some tea will you?" he called back.

Harry shrugged, he put the ingredients in place and so that they wouldn't spoil in his absence. He then went into the attached kitchen in the flat that Stefan lived in, waving his wand; he didn't even realize that he wasn't using an incantation or discernible spell at all. He was merely guiding his magic and allowing it to perform the Enchantment necessary to provide the tea.

With two piping hot cups of tea ladled onto Stefan's best (and only) silver tray, Harry levitated it to the front of the store. He placed it gently on the counter and was about to step from behind Stefan's back and meet the customer, when he stopped dead in his tracks.

An eerily familiar shade of bright red hair was clearly visible.

He froze up momentarily, his mind racing to place this individual whose face he couldn't see.

My brother Charlie works with dragons in Romania...

His eyes widened and he took careful steps back into the flat and stood with his back on the nearby wall, beside the door that led to the storefront.

"St-Steafan!" He called, "Could you please help me in the back on something?"

"Not now James," Stefan hollered back.

"It might explode." He answered back.

Stefan clicked his tongue in real annoyance, he probably said something to the customer and came back inside.

He found Harry on the other side of the Lab, hiding his face and sweating profusely.

"Harry...?" He whispered worriedly.

"Is that...is that Charlie Weasley upfront?" He asked with a visible tremor.

Stefan's eyes widened and he closed the door behind him, erecting a silencing ward he looked at Harry, "Yes, it is, he's a dragon handler at the Preserve. He comes down here every now and then to buy a few specialist potions for the burns they sustain, says he likes mine better than the potions' mistress' near the Preserve."

"He knows me Stefan." He whispered.

Stefan tensed but then recovered immediately and nodded once resolutely.

"No matter Harry, you stay here and work or stay silent, he's hardly in an investigative mood anyway, I doubt he'd even notice if I left him in there for ages, pretty banged up and miserable right now." He reassured.

He looked up genuinely curious, "Why?"

He asked this as Stefan was removing the ward and was leaving the room, he was halfway out the door when he responded in a whisper so Charlie wouldn't hear, "Says he's going to England for a funeral, his father died, some kind of attack. Pity really."

The door closed and Harry didn't move, Stefan's words still playing out in his mind as he remembered them. Simple words spoken in such a peaceful manner, yet they held such incomparable significance.

His mind was filled with visions of Mr. Weasley, kind, affable, muggle-obsessed Mr. Weasley, who was dead...

Tears unwittingly fell from his eyes, but he didn't dare make a noise, lest he alert himself to his grief.

The Amanta sat back in her comfortable armchair and regarded him with stern eyes.

"You must return to England." She said haltingly, repeating his words.

"There has been a death in the family of a very close friend, he needs me there by his side. If I don't go, I know I won't be able to live with myself." Harry answered in a monotone.

The Amanta nodded absently, "You are a rare student Harry, lacking in theory but more than making up for it in your practical assessments. I would hate to lose you before you had the chance of finishing your training with me."

Harry looked, unable to meet the Amanta's disappointed gaze, "I know that when I return, they won't let me come back here, not without a fight, a fight they would win undoubtedly."

"I'm afraid it doesn't work like that Harry, if you remember I registered your wand the day I accepted you as my student." She expounded in a calm tone, "Under Romanian Magical Law and under the confederation of rules for learning established by the various Guilds of Studies the world-over including the British adopted International Confederation of Wizards, that counts as a magical binding contract between the two involved parties. No matter what the relationship between the two countries and their ministries, they have no legal right to detain you in any shape, way or form that goes against my decree."

Harry was slack-jawed.

"It goes without saying that if you get caught, I will knock on every legal doorstep and bring you back. When I take on a student, the apprentice is never done until I say so." She said firmly, "That being said, I rather prefer to avoid the legal debacle altogether. It would be prudent for all of us, if you attended the funeral and weren't caught in the act."

He nodded.

"Assuming you are not caught, would you want to return Harry?" The Amanta expressed the biggest question fuelling his inner turmoil.

The truth was he had no idea, he didn't know if he wanted to return to Romania. Definitely his life was quieter, no new death threats,

well except for that one occasion in the pub and the other with the snatchers. But really, it was a much better life where he wasn't gawked at every second of the day. He also got to avoid Hogwarts under these conditions; he got to spare his friends the abject humiliation and revulsion they would have faced had they stood by him through these times. But on the other hand, he missed his home, he missed Hogwarts, he missed Ron and Hermione dearly. He missed running around the castle at midnight getting into trouble. He missed it all and if he went back, would he want to come back here, to his lonely life in Romania?

Well did he?

As clear as day, he knew he had to choose between what was right and what was easy. It would be easy to go back to Hogwarts, it would be right to stay here, honour his apprenticeship to the Amanta who had taught him so much and return when he was ready.

"I'll be back, Amanta. I will honour my apprenticeship, and I will do what is right. Just as I must do what is right by my friend and be by his side as he buries his father." He said in a whisper.

The Amanta nodded firmly at his answer, she stood tall in all her five-foot glory, "I would expect nothing less, Harry."

She waved her wand and summoned a small necklace from nearby; it was a simple silver chain with a coin-shaped pendant. There was an image of a shield on one side of the coin where two wands stood in the centre and emitted smoke from their tips. On the other side were the initials S.C.C.

"Travelling as a muggle would be ideal for you Harry both to and from Romania, you would be much harder to track that way. However, in the direst of circumstances, the activation phrase for this chain-portkey is 'Amanta'. It is an international portkey that will drop you on my doorstep if you place your wand on it and say the word." She said handing it to him.

"It can be easily traced by either of our ministries if you use it, but the political stalemate between the two would make it harder to establish contact. I would still have to fight an extensive legal battle if you used this, but I gather fighting this battle with you here would be easier than if you were there."

Harry smiled and accepted the necklace with a heartfelt thank-you. He tied it around his neck and buried it under his shirt.

"I'll be heading out by plane tomorrow morning Amanta." He informed her.

She nodded, "Very well, I will teach you some stealth and quick run-and-hide charms in the meantime, things you could use to make a quick escape if necessary. Your wand is still registered under my name when you will be in Britain, so use any and all magic liberally."

He grinned widely at that, briefly forgetting his sombre mood and the sadness that had overcome him since learning of Mr. Weasley's demise.

The rest of the day he practiced with the Amanta, on and on, spell after spell. He learnt how to effectively silence his movements, how to transfigure dirt and various commonplace elements in the environment into useful objects for simple potions and otherwise. He got a crash course in illegal portkey making if the need arose. Finally, he learnt several jinxes and hexes to incapacitate an opponent by surprise temporarily and some permanently if he needed to.

It had been a productive day and it was with a heavy heart Harry bid farewell to the Amanta as he returned to his hotel to pack his belongings and head back to his homeland to pay homage to a man he deeply respected in the little while he had known him.

He walked through the double doors purposefully, his hood was drawn up to the hilt and his face was obscured by a charm taught to anyone who dealt in the Department of Mysteries.

When they approached him with this plan, he had been apoplectic with rage that they accused him of being a Death Eater, never mind that they were right. He threatened to have them removed from their posts in the Ministry if they dared to spread such vicious lies about him and the reappearance of a certain Dark Lord. Of course, they weren't operatives of the Department of Mysteries for nothing, they were thorough in their research and when they were done with him, they had all the evidence needed to implicate him for a number of crimes (most of which he had committed willingly).

But more than anything else, they offered him the one thing he desired more than anything else. Freedom. When he had joined the ranks of the Dark Lord as a Death Eater, he had done it to placate his blood-fanatic parents and family, he too believed in the doctrine of blood supremacy and believed that following the Dark Lord was the way of the future to protect wizarding culture from the influence of those with dirty blood. But in the respite after the Dark Lord's defeat at Potter's hand, the thirteen years where he was given free reign to exert his influence through Lucius; he had lived a comfortable and cushy life. When the Dark Lord was reborn, that way of life came to an end and he wasn't exactly thrilled.

So when the operatives of this elusive Department approached him, he hedged his bets, got a binding contract and unbreakable vow and threw everything he had into being a spy for them. Now he reported whenever Voldemort made a plan, it was only after their get-go did he attack muggles when he was ordered to. In return for his services, the Department was going to relocate his wife and only daughter into an Eastern European country, the less details he knew now the better. His wife and daughter were due to leave any day now; he had after all fulfilled his side of the bargain and was itching to leave himself. New identities, new lives, a fresh start and all the money he would ever need.

Turning a corner along a deserted passageway, he approached the bookshelf he knew of. The Department of Mysteries was a mystery on its own, all the meeting rooms were hidden and no meeting room was known to more than four operatives at a time.

Tapping his wand along the shelves on the right spines, he muttered the password and the bookshelf slid away and allowed him entry. The room beyond was nothing lavish as one would expect, nor was it secretive and mysterious in any way. It looked like a regular conference room, a rectangular wooden table in the centre, some tea boiling on the side and two similarly black-cloaked operatives present there like every time before.

"Agent Silver, Agent Gold." He greeted the two indiscernible faces with a polite nod.

Seated behind the table was his boss (so to speak), Agent Gold was head of his operation and gave him all his orders for further action. He was definitely a man of tall stature, pureblood or at the least

wizard-raised by his walk and personality. Standing to his left was Agent Silver: much shorter and she rarely, if ever, spoke during one of their meetings, usually to clarify a point she may or may not have understood during his reports.

"Glad you could make it Agent Rosier," Agent Gold greeted him, "Tea?"

Rosier nodded. He had a particular likeness for the tea he drank here at the Department. Like all times, he performed the necessary spells to detect anything within it, neither of the two agents commented on his lack of trust in them. Satisfied he took a long sip and sat back, ready to make his report.

"The Dark Lord has made a plan to release all his followers from Azkaban prison, he is due to attack within the next week." He started with the most important news.

"Have the Dementors been courted this time as well?" Agent Gold inquired calmly, as if discussing the mass breakout of Azkaban prison was an everyday event.

He nodded as he drank some more tea, "They have and willingly and overwhelmingly come to the Dark Lord's side. The Dark Lord has also planned the raising of a Fidelius around his new headquarters over the summer. Right now the base of operations is in Parkinson Summer Lodge in Birmingham. When the renovation of the Headquarters is complete, the Dark Lord will move there, it is Malfoy Manor located in Knaresborough, near York. For all intents and purposes, the Secret Keeper will be the Dark Lord himself."

Agent Gold sat back and nodded at this new information, "Anything else worthy of note since your report last week?"

"Yes," Rosier responded, "Adrian Avery may be a problem. He nearly found me out and I managed to perform a memory charm and obliviated his memories of that event altogether. But Avery is an accomplished wizard and he will figure it out ultimately."

"The Department will take care of it." Agent Gold responded.

He didn't need to question what was the meaning of 'taking care'.

"When will my daughter and wife be spirited away?" He asked uneasily.

"Tomorrow afternoon, they will be taking a portkey to France, where one of our agents will be waiting for them. They will then be alternately portkeyed, broom-ridden and floored from one destination to another for the next forty hours. I would suggest bringing pepper-up and shrinking their belongings for the journey come France. After the required distractions are set, it will be easy to phase them out entirely." Agent Gold explained.

"What about me?" He was quick to point out, "I finished my duties as a spy and I am itching to leave. I know the vow stated ten months, but it is already December, I wish to leave if it is at all possible."

Agent Gold seemed to hold a silent conversation with Agent Silver, "We were discussing the same thing and we've decided that we have one last assignment for you and then you can leave. The Department will be able to facilitate your departure easily and it will be just the push the country needs to accept the Dark Lord's return."

He was keen to discover what this new assignment would be, he sat up straight in his chair and was waiting.

Agent Gold summoned a previously invisible folder from behind him; it was commonplace by all means, a drab, brown folder thick with leaflets and parchments.

"Inside you will find all the information and strategies you will need as well as contacts and 'when's' and 'how's' for the necessary equipment for the successful carrying out of the mission." Agent Gold went over the details then and talked at length about the acquisition of the necessary potions and their usage and potency.

He nodded at the right places listening avidly to what he knew would be his one-way ticket out of this mess. But with each new detail he learnt about, he was more and more worried, polyjuice, scent-obscuring elixir, a spell to change his magical signature and the address for a favourable spare wand. This was a big task.

"Who exactly is the target you want me to off?" Rosier asked while cutting to the chase when Agent Gold finished.

"Why we thought it would be obvious," Agent Gold said delicately and Rosier knew that if his face weren't hidden by the spell he would be smirking right now.

"Cornelius Fudge."

She pushed aside the back wall and came through to the conference room; she had been watching the progression of the meeting between Agent Gold, Silver and Rosier. When Rosier seemed to have stopped ranting about the impossibility of his task, he had been calmly informed that he was in too deep to back out now. He was then made aware of all his escape routes and the protection the Department had in place for him.

Finally calm enough, he conceded he never liked the Minister anyway and would be doing a service to the community by getting rid of him. He then stood and left with another curt nod.

Once the door of the bookshelf was sealed firmly, she made an entrance and stood behind the two agents who had handled the meeting.

"I must say that you two have once again played your roles of senior officials convincingly Agents Gold and Silver."

She took a seat at the opposite end of the table and the two agents followed suit.

"Do you think he'll succeed in this mission Agent Black?" Agent Silver piqued up.

She leaned back in her chair, her eyes, though obscured by the spell, seemed to be searching for the right answer in the dark depths of her cloak, "It is immaterial if he succeeds Agent Silver, he has outlived his usefulness. It is Department policy to never reuse a spy after more than a few months, we either get rid of them by evacuation or permanently. In his case, we have given him a suicide mission that will result in his death."

"Agent Black what about the vows and contracts?" Agent Gold pointed out.

"Carefully worded Agent Gold, words play a very important role in such promises, Rosier was promised 'release' from his service to the Dark Lord, he never asked for clarification on the word 'release' and we never gave one, 'release' can very easily mean death, Gold." She explained patiently - after all, they were only rookies.

"So we will kill him irrespective of him killing the Minister?" Agent Silver asked.

Agent Black shrugged, "We won't do anything. Amelia Bones has already been made aware that there will be an attempt on the Minister's life. The Minister has issued a code whereby any who attack him should be attacked by his guard with aims to kill and not capture. If he does manage to kill the Minister along the way, it will be an added bonus."

"So what next Agent Black?" Agent Gold asked curiously.

"Next, I am headed out of the country, some family business to take care of. I want you two to approach Avery, reel him in. We need a new spy in the Dark Lord's ranks and he is a weak link." She informed them as she exited from the way she came in.

She went to the back of the new room, which was technically her office, but didn't seem like one at all. There were no personal effects in there and only a table with a chair behind it at one end. She went out of her office and removed the charms from her cloak and face.

Her robes turned into their usual sky blue and her face cleared to show that of a middle-aged woman, who didn't seem to be scared of anything.

She exited the adjoining room and entered a personal lift, which then connected to the main line of lifts in the Ministry. Within minutes she was at the Ministry Apparition Point and she apparated out, appearing in an alley in downtown London near Charing Cross Road.

Her searching eyes looked about her carefully and seeing no one about, she pulled out her chain from under her robes and tapped it surreptitiously.

A portkey tugged on her navel and she flew through countries with its magic. She landed steadily on her feet and looked around at her

surroundings curiously. She opened the windows and looked out at the Mediterranean Sea. She breathed a sigh of relief; she was home.

It was a heavily subdued affair that he observed from his vantage point high up in the trees where he was disillusioned and hidden under his cloak (it never hurt to be overcautious). He had hidden himself in the woods that surrounded the beautiful country Weasley abode. He sat there with sad eyes, one hand on the branch he was sitting on, the other balancing his weight on the bark of the large cherry wood. He had cast a semi-feather-light charm on himself so it became easier to raise his body up to the level of the tree he wanted to climb with little exerted force.

Sitting up that high, he observed the gathered assembly keenly, trying to decipher those gathered from each other.

There were sixteen rows and over twenty columns of chairs arranged in neat lines in the recently expanded Weasley backyard Burrow. Even more witches and wizards all decked in black were huddled to the sides in large groups with handkerchiefs dabbing their eyes.

Each and every one of the seats was occupied.

The Weasleys may have not been the richest of families, but they had love in abundance and the turnout today displayed the loyalty and love that Arthur Weasley retained in his career and life.

Sitting right in the front was a team of redheaded individuals; Harry knew in a single glance that it was the seven Weasley children. At the end of the first row sat the sobbing Weasley matriarch, mourning the loss of her husband and father of her children. There was a large black dog sniffing and mewling sadly by the legs of the bushy haired brunette in the front row, sitting beside one of the taller redheads. Sitting in the second row was Dumbledore, Harry recognized him by his shining silver hair, beside him sat Mad-Eye Moody (the real one) and Remus Lupin.

Despite the sadness and seriousness of the situation, Harry had the irrational urge to go up to his friends and give them the support he knew they deserved from him. But his time had not come yet.

The ceremony was large, heartfelt and more than anything else, simple. Just like the Weasley family. There was no grand stage, no fanfare and showers and sparks; there was a group of people uniting in their sorrow for a very good man.

It was a closed casket funeral as Harry observed, but there was a large portrait of Arthur Weasley hung beside the casket, a much younger Arthur Weasley waving and smiling in what Harry assumed were his wedding robes.

A middle-aged man that Harry eerily recognized as Amos Diggory went up on the stage; he turned to the gathered assembly and cleared his throat. The small number of whispers and hushed conversations came to an end as every eye was turned on him.

Amos sighed sadly and took several moments to gather himself. "Arthur Weasley. There isn't much I can say to describe this man except to say that he entirely befuddled me from the moment I met him on the Hogwarts Express before my first-year at Hogwarts. Arthur was a sixth-year Gryffindor at the time, even then he was as kind and as thoughtful as he has always been, he found a chubby firstie be mercilessly teased and picked on by some upper year students. Arthur was always mild-mannered, even-headed, but what most people tended to skip about him was that he was quick with a wand. In short order he saved that little firstie, sat with him for his entire trip to Hogwarts, bought him chocolate of the trolley from his own summer savings that he had worked hard for to court the woman that would be his future wife."

Harry heard Mrs. Weasley let out a strangled half-sob and half-laugh and he was quite sure he heard a muttered 'idiot' from her.

Mr. Diggory smiled at her sadly and continued, "That was the kind of person Arthur was, a man who would give up his time, his money and his love to anyone who was in need of it. That same firstie became a Hufflepuff and even though he was in a different House, even though he was five years younger, even though he was obnoxious and rude, Arthur Weasley diligently asked him every morning how he was faring and if he needed help."

He looked away and wiped some tears from his eyes, "In the years to come that same firstie would one day be walking outside the Ministry hopelessly because he had no chance of gaining any

employment with his less-than-stellar performance on the NEWTs. Arthur Weasley would find him, take him into his office and get him a job no questions asked and no thank-you required."

He sniffed, "In the past forty years Arthur Weasley has been my guardian, my mentor and my friend. He taught me to look for the good in people, he held me as I buried my seventeen-year-old son, he covered all my work at the Ministry as I was distraught, he collected me every night from the pub when I drank myself silly. I can never fully account how much Arthur Weasley has done for me – the list would never end."

Mr. Diggory looked away and took some deep breaths, he walked back a few steps and turned towards the casket, placing his hands on the cover and smiling in a bittersweet manner. When he felt he was done whispering to the casket, he turned back to the audience and continued.

"He always said one thing to me, that I believed was his philosophy in and about life, he said, 'Amos, you live to love and you love to live, but there is no greater life lived than one filled with love'. Today, seated here in this gallery, we all mourn this amazing, honest, good man that we all loved, that touched us all in some way or another. He lived a good life, a life of love, love that he shared and spread amongst us all."

He paused and smiled widely, "When you think of Arthur Weasley, don't think of his death, think of his life, think of his love, think of all that he's given you and taught you to give to others. Everyday you decide to love a little more, when you help the little firstie on the Hogwarts Express, you're doing him proud."

There was a large applause when Mr. Diggory finished his tribute to Arthur Weasley and walked off the stage, his face buried in his hands. Mrs. Weasley gave him a huge hug and he patted her back sympathetically. Those in the crowd had tears in their eyes, but small smiles nonetheless. Harry too was unconsciously clapping his hands, tears staining his cheeks and small hiccups to go with them.

After him, Dumbledore went up and shared some anecdotes of Mr. Weasley's time at Hogwarts; he then described some experiences of fighting beside him in the First War. He talked at length of Mr. Weasley's devotion to the Light side, how he spent his life to do

what was right over what was easy. In the end, he expressed his hope that wherever Mr. Weasley was that day, he would smile upon them and enjoy his next great adventure to the fullest.

Madam Amelia Bones who gave a heartfelt speech of her love and admiration of the man that ran in the backrooms of the Ministry followed Dumbledore. She extolled his virtues and his honour and shared some hilarious tales of his workings with muggles and his unhealthy fascination with them. The crowd was once again smiling widely despite the seriousness of the situation and there were a few mirthful chuckles at some of Mr. Weasley's more enthusiastic antics. Harry wasn't quite sure if after a point Mrs. Weasley was laughing hysterically or crying or couldn't decide between the two.

The last to speak on this day was the focal figure of Arthur Weasley's life, his loud, rambunctious and doting wife, Molly.

She approached the stage carefully, swirling a bit as if unsure to be on her own two feet, a handkerchief clasped in her hands.

She regarded everyone with a downcast eye, twirling the handkerchief in her hands consciously, she took a deep breath and looked up and then started.

"Arthur was one year ahead of me in school, I knew him by name and recognized him, but I never really knew him. The first time I really met him was when I was fourteen. We were attending a large Winter Ball at the Melwyns that break. I had attended the Ball in my finest dress and was very excited. When I got out of the Floo my dress was stained with some of the powder residue, like any young lady, I was horrified."

She chuckled at her own naiveté, "That was when I first set eyes on the man who would come to mean the world to me. He found me bemoaning my state and gently took me by the hand and to his mother. With one quick scourgify I was right as rain. It was only then I thanked his mother and him profusely, that I noticed that he was quite fetching."

A small chuckle was heard in the crowd and some of the Weasley children made half-hearted retching noises.

Mrs. Weasley's smile waned slightly as she lost herself in her memories, "He escorted me to the Ball like a gentleman and then danced with me all night long. The one time I danced with someone else, he was red like a tomato and butted in halfway through the song. Ever since the Ball, I was smitten and so was he. He courted me for years and when I graduated out of Hogwarts he asked for my hand in marriage."

She sobbed again, but held herself together, "He was such a good man," she whispered.

She ran her hand up and down his portrait-face lovingly, tears leaking down her cheeks as she continued, "I was very cross with him, when he told me he wanted to devote his life to bettering wizard-muggle relations. It was a good thing to do, but not exactly right for a man who wanted to start a family. We fought long and hard and I told him that it was either the muggles or me."

She chuckled again, "He took me by my wrist, the angriest I'd ever seen him, and told me pointedly that I was the woman he loved, not despite all my flaws and qualities, but including them all, the good and the bad. He wouldn't want me as anything less or more than exactly the way I was and I should want the same from him."

She sniffed audibly, "He was a man who would fight for muggles in a society that looked down on them, he was a man who had seven children and took care of them all to the best of his ability. He hadn't spent a knut on himself since the day he bought his wedding robes."

Her voice began to crack; "He gave up everything with a large smile for his family, for his children..." she sniffed and sobbed, "...for me. Every second of every day that he breathed... he breathed for us, he lived for us, he loved us."

With clear resolve in her eyes she went on, "Arthur devoted his life to helping our society and he devoted his love to our family. Arthur may have never bought a mansion, but his love, his presence made our house, a home worth living in."

She cleared her throat, "He was a good man, a great man; he gave me the one thing I wanted more than anything else in the world. Most girls dreamt of the perfect wedding: the right flowers, the right ceremony, venue, guest-list and all of that. In the thirty-one years

that he was my husband, Arthur made me feel like his bride every day we were together. The way he looked at me never changed since the day he saw me in my wedding robes. Arthur... he gave me a marriage."

She paused and wiped her tears, "He was a good man, an honest man, a man any woman would dream to have. Remember him for his love, his honesty and his integrity. Remember him for always doing right whenever it was within his means and many a time when it wasn't. Remember him for how he changed your life."

Silence.

Clap.

Dumbledore stood up and clapped, the hint of tears evident in his eyes. Following his lead, the crowd clapped loudly, women were bawling and men sniffled.

Harry was crying himself.

A good man had been lost, but his loss, his memory and his love would never be forgotten.

Empty.

Years from now if anyone ever asked him what it felt like to bury his own father while still in school, he would respond with the most honest answer: empty.

He had always considered and in fact been told that he was an emotional person, in fact his emotions were all over the place on most occasions. He was not very perceptive to others' emotions by a long shot, but anyone could usually tell what he was feeling in an instant. It was written all over his face as his mother put it.

Yet on this extremely emotional day, he felt empty. There were all kinds of reactions from everyone he knew and held dear: fear, panic, disbelief, pain, regret, anger, determination, but he was neither of these. His family assumed he was in a state of shock, he was still reconciling with the fact that his father was...dead.

Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't.

But one thing he realized, beyond a shadow of a doubt, was that his father died doing what he believed was right. His father died with many happy memories and few regrets. His father was a Gryffindor through and through and never left anything unvoiced.

His father made a difference.

He had grown up always angry at his father, he blamed him on some level for not being fabulously wealthy and he considered him an incapable caregiver who couldn't provide him with everything he ever wanted. With time, he learnt to find solace in his brothers' cast-offs. With time, he learnt to not be too offended when someone in the village sniffed disdainfully in his direction when he walked with frumpy clothes and obvious poverty. With time, he accepted his station in life, but he never stopped blaming his father for bringing him into the world in such a position.

In his blind jealousy, he overlooked all the good his father had done for him.

He never acknowledged all those nights his father sat up teaching him how to play chess, he never appreciated the replacement chess-set pieces he got the immediate next day when his old ones became unusable, he never registered that his father bought him sixteen chocolate frogs a week since he was nine in the hopes of finding Agrippa.

In the unquestionable blameworthiness he apportioned his father, he overlooked all the love his father showered him with.

He knew that Grandfather Weasley's old platinum ring was the only memento his father possessed of his own father, he never appreciated when it was sold with a smile to pay for his education at Hogwarts. He knew getting a new broom was difficult, but his father laughingly spent his personal savings and indulged his youngest son when he was ten. He knew his father loved him, but for some reason he never believed it.

For the first time in his life: it was too late to say sorry, it was too late to say 'I love you', it was too late for regrets.

Ronald Weasley was empty.

"Ron," his best friend whispered in the silence of the night, "do you need something? I can run down to the kitchen and get you anything you might need."

She knew better than to ask him if he was okay. Anyone with half a mind knew he wasn't okay, that he wouldn't ever be okay again, not like before. She had more than most people's share of intellect.

They were sitting in his room, the funeral had ended hours ago and all the guests expressed their condolences and went on their way. Some lingered, there were many present from the Order of the Phoenix spending the night. He was with Hermione; he had been with her for most of the past few days since the news was revealed. His mother was inconsolable; his older brothers had moved back home and had begun actively joining the Order in earnest.

He spent his days holding Hermione's hand and listening to her ramble. She could talk on and on for ages and there was nothing more he needed than to have her voice, her inane chatter on various school-related and some unrelated issues fill the void, the emptiness that his father's death had left in him.

Through her words and the haze of nervous one-sided banter between the two, Ron knew why he was empty; it was because he was scared. It was because he was regretful that he never said the things he wanted to say to his father. Now he never could.

The room was dark, even the stark orange shade of his Chudley Canon posters was hard to make out. They had been sitting there since he had holed himself up after dinner. Nobody bothered them; they wouldn't begrudge any Weasley their comfort in this time. He wound his fingers through hers without saying a word.

His regret was eating him up inside.

"You know Ron, there was some tart left from the service that I know you love, I should get you some..."

She stood up and made to leave, she took one stride towards the door and stopped. He refused to let go of her hand, his fingers still wound with her own.

"Ron?" There was a nervous stutter to her voice.

"Sit with me." His voice was raspy from disuse.

She complied sans complaint and retook her original seat beside him on his bed.

He didn't say anything more for the longest time, his hand still holding onto hers and she squeezed back with equal vigour.

He finally broke the silence, "I regret Hermione, I regret I never got to tell my dad I loved him one last time, I regret never appreciating him like I should have, I regret so many things..."

"Ron..." She said; he knew she was tearing up.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and drew him in to her embrace, letting him bury his neck in her bushy curls as she kissed his forehead soothingly.

"That's the brilliance about parents Ron," she said haltingly, "They know these things, even if you never say them, they know you better than you know yourself. Your dad knew how you felt about him, even if you couldn't say it one more time and loved you dearly Ron, I'm sure of it."

Ron pulled back and looked away, "My father was always saying, 'be a Gryffindor, if you believe in it, go do something, don't just stand there'."

He smiled thinly, "It's why all of us ended up in Gryffindor, we all wanted to make him so proud."

"Ron, what are you trying to say?" Hermione asked gently.

"I'm done hiding Hermione, I'm done denying as well." He said resolutely, screwing up his courage to finally say what he'd felt for so long, "Today I realized how easily you can lose someone you love, before you realize it, they are gone and you can never do things right ever again."

"Ron, what...?" Hermione was flustered.

He looked her dead in the eye and spoke from his heart, "I love you Hermione. I'm not going to run or hide anymore, life's too short."

She tilted her head to the side and tears were shining in her eyes, she pressed her head forward and he didn't move. Her lips pushed against his, the kiss was short and somewhat languid. She then pulled back and he had a dazed look.

"I...I think I love you too Ron, but let's take it slow for now."

Ron nodded ruefully, "I think that would be best."

They smiled at each other and stayed in a comfortable silence for some time. Finally Hermione got up, bustled around the room and found the vial Madame Pomfrey had handed her that day for Ron.

"Ron, I want you to have this, it's Dreamless Sleep potion, I think you will be needing it tonight." She said in a neutral voice.

Ron didn't resist, he uncorked the vial and swallowed the bitter potion without complaint. He too knew he would need it tonight.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Both Hermione and he turned towards his bedroom window with creased brows. Hermione put a finger on her lips in a 'shush' gesture and withdrew her wand. He did the same. She approached the window and quickly threw it open, backing up a few feet and taking carefully aim at the weird shaped intruder.

Squinting his eyes he tried to place the form, but Hermione beat him to it, "Harry?"

His eyes were wide open when Harry jumped through the window, his firebolt under him. Harry took one look at him and hung his head low.

"I'm so sorry Ron, I heard about what happened, I...I don't know what to say, Mr. Weasley was an amazing man, I'm sad he's gone. I heard all the nice things people had to say about him at the funeral, I'm sorry I wasn't by your side where you needed me most." He sounded dejected.

Ron approached his best friend, the potion beginning to take effect, but he had to get this out before he was knocked out for the night, "I don't blame you Harry, you had to do what you had to do. I'm glad you're here now, I'm glad you came."

He gave him a hug, it wasn't a cute, girly sort of hug, it was a manly hug like the ones shared between two brothers, with a lot of back patting and a little grunting.

It was during this embrace with his long-lost best friend that the Dreamless Sleep Potion decided to kick in and Ron lost consciousness.

Harry Potter was an anomaly among anomalies; he was unpredictable without a fault. Just ask Hermione, he drove her spare by doing everything averse to how its supposed to be done and then changing what hasn't been changed in a long time.

As she helped him place Ron back in bed, she was sweating profusely, not from the effort, but from the recent situation she had gotten herself stuck in. Her best friend had declared his love to her, something she had been waiting to hear for some time now on the day of his father's funeral and then her other best friend that had disappeared for months turned up on a broomstick outside their window.

He was so unpredictable and she mused, it was probably this characteristic of his that drew her to him. She was organized, prepared, always five steps ahead of where she should be, he was ten steps behind and still ended up on top in the end.

"So how are you Hermione?" He asked in way of making conversation when the two sat down after tucking Ron in.

She didn't respond immediately, she took some time to observe him, make sure he looked all right. He had grown a few inches since she last saw him, but that was expected. Leaning against the windowsill, he looked pretty much as he always looked. Some would call him wiry, but she thought he was just thin, thankfully no longer abnormally thin.

"I've been right chuffed of course," she said sarcastically, "Its been a fine couple of months what with my best friend disappearing with

just a letter of explanation, that hag Umbridge torturing students and now this."

Harry seemed to shrink as her tone turned venomous, "So I take it its not exactly been fun."

She sighed and looked away, "A lot has happened Harry, but its all going to be okay now, you're back after all and not going anywhere if I have anything to say about it."

He looked slightly guilty and Hermione's eyes narrowed, "You are back for good aren't you?"

"Hermione, where I've been, I've learnt so much, I know so much more now than I ever did at Hogwarts. I miss Hogwarts and I miss you and Ron, but there... I'm free, I don't have to hide my scar all the time and I'm just someone in the crowd." He espoused passionately.

Hermione sniffed disdainfully, "You ran away Harry, although I didn't agree with your decision, I respected it as what you needed to do at the time. But enough time has passed; it is high time you came back home. I, that is to say, we miss you a lot Harry and we need you here."

Harry walked forward from his previous place and stood in front of Hermione where she sat on the ground. He followed suit and sat down cross-legged on the floor with her, his face inches from hers. He was breathing deeply and his eyes had a slightly glazed look to them, but he didn't back away from her and she didn't either.

He took both her hands in his own and responded sincerely, "Hermione I know it would be nice if I returned, but I can't, every bone in my body, every nerve is screaming that I shouldn't be here to begin with, but I couldn't stay away, not now, not when something like this happened."

She was mightily confused then, "How do you mean Harry? Did you not want to come back?"

He shook his head and leaned in closer, she did too and he whispered in her ear, "I've been studying Divination Hermione, not the drivel that Trelawney has been teaching us, but the real deal,

from a real Seer. I know you don't think much of it, but I've been going about it the right way and I can't explain why, but I just know that going back to Hogwarts would just throw things off-schedule."

She was breathing just as deeply as he was now, her heart was beating erratically in her chest, pounding away and it felt like it was straining to break through her ribs. Blood pounded in her ears and her throat felt parched. Suddenly her nerves were hypersensitive and she was acutely aware of Harry skin touching her own. She knew that if the lights were on, she would be beet red in embarrassment. What shocked her most was when she felt an uncomfortable accumulation of wetness between thighs and an uncontrollable urge to kiss Harry.

"Harry..." She strangled out, unable to explain this reaction she was having to his mere presence, "you've got to return... Divination or... not." Her words were jumbling in her head and her entire harangue was muddled in the process.

He seemed to be breathing as deeply as her, his breath was ragged and his face, a scant inch away from her own. She didn't even realize when the two of them had edged so close together that their noses were touching and her hand was placed on his chest.

He gulped and his green eyes widened astronomically, at first she didn't register why, but then she felt her hand lower from his chest on its own accord and bunch up in his robes, brushing against his trousers. She wrapped her hand around his fabric-covered, hardened member and squeezed him, causing him to groan.

Before she knew what was happening next, Harry crashed his lips on hers and they locked into a fiery embrace, her hand never relinquishing its sweet pressure on his member. Lips smacked against lips, teeth clattered against teeth, tongues licked and probed all over, it was not sweet, it was not gentle, it was desperate, almost animalistic.

He pushed her down on the floor, his larger frame pressing against her own smaller one. The wetness in her centre was becoming uncomfortable as Harry's member was brutally rubbed against it. He submerged one hand in her hair and tugged on it so hard that it hurt, Hermione cried out but it wasn't heard because his mouth was adamantly covering hers. Her nipples were erect and brushing

against his chest, but the layers of clothing between them dampened the feeling.

A mad haze blinded the two best friends and they seemed to have no control over their actions beyond the inexplicable urge to rut like dogs.

One poignant thought broke through this web of lust and struck her like a bucket of cold water: RON WAS RIGHT THERE!

Harry was mightily confused and greatly ashamed as he picked Hermione up and placed her in bed beside Ron. He had just pressed himself against his best friend, snogged her crazily and then shot a sleeping spell at her when she looked like she was about to scream upon realizing their actions. He regretted hitting Hermione with the spell, but knew it had to be done; he had to do it to prevent the foiling of his plan.

He had stayed back in the Woods for after the funeral ended, when the last of the guests had trickled away, he had made a second trip, but stayed a good distance away from the Burrow itself. At last, he saw Dumbledore emerge from the Weasley home and apparate away and he knew his chances were infinitely better now.

He gathered that there were a few people inside as of then: Sirius in dog form, Moody and some pink-haired woman he didn't really recognize, besides all the Weasleys.

As soon as it was night, Harry crept into the house and went into Mrs. Weasley's room. She was depressed to say the least when he found her, but upon seeing him, she broke into a huge smile. They talked for some time and he gave her a big hug. He expressed his sadness at not being able to say goodbye to Mr. Weasley and she reassured him that Mr. Weasley did love him dearly. The sheer proof that he did was in the fact that the letter he had left for Mr. Wesley was in his 'Arthur box'. He kept a box with all the little, worthless trinkets that meant the world to him and were invaluable in his humble opinion. Harry's neatly folded letter was right above the watch Bill bought for his father from his first salary. Harry was touched.

When he felt his time to leave had come, Mrs. Weasley had quite predictably pitched a fit and Harry had anticipated it. He managed to

extricate himself long enough to walk out of her room and hide himself under his Invisibility Cloak in the hallway before she got out. Seeing him gone, she yelled loudly and ran down the stairs to gather the houseguests and begin searching for him. Mrs. Weasley, Bill, Charlie, Moody, Sirius in his animagus form and the odd-looking woman quickly left the house in his search and were scouring the Woods.

He re-enlarged his broomstick, climbed aboard while under his cloak and flew out the window up to the second highest room, which was Ron's. He intended to spend some time with his friends and then be on his way quickly enough. Everything was going fine.

Then Hermione happened.

That little stunt cost him a lot of time and the houseguests were beginning to come back home to call for back up in their hunt. He managed to write a letter each for Ron and Hermione and leave it by the bed before jumping on his broom and disappearing into the night sky.

He had spent an extra hour with Ron and Hermione, forty minutes of that extra hour was spent dry humping Hermione while Ron was sleeping in the same room.

He felt sick with himself, but in the more analytical part of his mind, he wondered what made him react like that to Hermione, he had never had more feelings than just purely platonic towards Hermione. Suddenly all he could think about were her brown curls flying wildly in the air as she was slapping against his crotch, his dick plunged deep into her honeying depths. He'd be lying if he said he frequently hadn't had such dreams about Hermione when sleeping. But he always dismissed those as dreams conjured by his hormone-addled teenage mind, but now... now he doubted himself. Were all those dreams some kind of a sign by his own mind telling him to stop living in denial?

He shook himself and dispersed those thoughts, but the lingering doubt still remained.

She had always meant so much to him, was it possible for him to have more feelings towards her than he first realized? Did he fancy her?

A warm feeling filled his heart and spread from his head to toes as the thought of fancying Hermione came to him. There were feelings there that he hadn't explored in the past. But now wasn't the time to dwell on those thoughts, he still had a lot of ground to cover.

He was flying over the Woods at that time, he saw several of houseguests looking about keenly, but he was looking for one in particular. It took a few more minutes, but he found his target surreptitiously separate himself from the rest of the team, as if he knew where to search. Harry swooped down towards the large black dog and stopped beside it, removing his Invisibility Cloak in the process.

The large grim-like dog transmuted into a tall shaggy-haired man with haunted eyes, Sirius Black opened his hands wide and was preparing to encase his godson in a mammoth hug.

He whipped his wand out and held it just below Sirius' chin, giving him pause, "I don't have much time Sirius, and so I'm going to ask you this once and only once."

Taking a deep breath, he pulled together his courage and blurted it out, "Are you my father?"

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

That was the only word running wildly through Moody's mind as he clumped through the woodlands that surrounded the Weasley home. Arthur's death had thrown everyone off course, and no one had even thought that Harry might turn up for the funeral. The letters that his friends received more than confirmed the fact that he was out of the country. They assumed that news would never reach him as the news had been kept out of the Prophet for the most part.

But he had come; he had turned up right under their noses and by the looks of things had disappeared once again. Time and time again they underestimated the boy and he surprised them every time.

It had now been over an hour since Moody had begun his search and he was certain that the boy was somewhere nearby, his senses screamed at him to think so.

A large black, grim-like dog emerged from the bushes and barked in his direction. He nodded in its direction, recognizing Black and indicating the left area as the next space he would be exploring, he then pointed towards the right and implied he wanted him to search there. The dog nodded once and scampered down the path. He went his way.

It was another half an hour later when all his detection spells were turning up empty and he wasn't getting even a small trace of the boy that he knew that he had escaped.

With a heavy heart and muttered paths under his breath, Moody made his way back to the Burrow, maybe someone else had found the boy, but he doubted it.

Entering the backdoor, he entered the Weasley kitchen and saw the others milling about, there were many Order members congregating and Albus stood at the head of it all.

When he entered, everyone stopped and turned in his direction, he looked down and shook his head in the negative. A collective groan was heard and everyone visibly deflated. His eyes roamed about the kitchen and fell upon Black sitting at the table, nursing a small bruise.

"Did you find him your way, Black?" He asked conversationally.

He looked up perplexed, "How do you mean? I haven't seen you since the beginning."

He was on-guard now, he pointed his wand right at him and demanded someone ask him a question to confirm his identity.

Remus stepped up and asked a question about their schooling days and Black answered honestly. He lowered his wand when Lupin confirmed that it was indeed Black.

"But it doesn't make sense. Yer the only black dog animagus 'round here."

Black was even more puzzled and so was everyone else, so he then went into detail explaining his meeting with a black dog animagus

that he assumed was Black and how he pointed him in the opposite direction.

"Blimey!" Tonks, of all people, exploded, "That was Harry!"

He shook his head in the negative, "Yer off yer rocker lass, even if Potter managed the transmutation in four months, he isn' related to Black directly enough 'n' his father was a stag."

"No Moody," she glared at Black and Remus, "I can't believe I withheld this vital piece of information from everyone on your say."

Albus intervened and calmed the tension palpable in the air, "Perhaps you could elaborate Nymphadora."

"I think she'd rather not as its none of her business." Black pointedly said in her direction.

"Poppycock Sirius! You know the prophecy and we all know the significance of it, it is our business!" She opposed vehemently, she turned towards Dumbledore and blurted, "Sirius is Harry's father by magic not James Potter. He performed the Ritual of Magical Adoption without telling the Potters way back in September 1981."

Silence, complete silence reigned in the room.

Moody was red in the face and he broke the tension with a loud yell, "BLACK YOU FOOL!"

It was a very subdued family of redheads and one brunette that boarded the Hogwarts Express at the end of the winter holidays. The excitement caused by Harry's mysterious appearance and then abrupt disappearance was short-lived and the sadness of their loss permeated everything they did that break.

The adults wouldn't tell them what had happened, they refused to discuss it and Harry's godfather was on permanent probation for some reason. Everybody gave him and Professor Lupin a death glare whenever they were in the room.

Ginny Weasley sat back in her place on the Hogwarts Express with tiredness. The compartment contained her older brothers and Hermione and yet not a word had been spoken throughout. The

twins hadn't come out of their shells since the news was revealed, it seemed like a part of them, their fun-loving parts, had been buried with their father. Ron was a mess and he made very ill fated attempts at hiding it. But ever since Harry's visit Hermione had been distant and jumpy, but she refused to talk about it. The two of them had received letters from Harry before he left. They had been short and to the point apparently, but the two of them refused to share those letters with anyone, they were too personal. Hermione especially.

The compartment door slid open yet again and Alicia Spinnet came through. She expressed her condolences like Angelina and Colin and Dennis and Neville had done so before her. They accepted them nonetheless.

She asked one more question though, one they hadn't considered, "Will we still be continuing with the PA?"

Years from now, if anyone asked her why she immediately turned to Ron, she would still never have an answer. But right at that moment, Ginny, Fred, George and Hermione simultaneously turned to Ron who looked at Alicia contemplatively. He didn't say anything for a long time as he seemed to rage with his emotions.

"Now, more than ever, we need each other and the PA. It won't be stopping Alicia, we'll send out the next meeting date soon."

He was simple, to the point and honest.

Although none of them realized it, but by refusing to stop living their lives and preparing for the fight they knew was inevitable, they had taken their first steps towards recovery.

Trudging up the familiar cobbled road, Harry made his way to the Amanta's house. He had arrived in Romania late the night before and had made his way back to reclaim his room at the hotel he had taken up permanent residence in.

His trip back home had exhausted him, emotionally and otherwise. First, all the surprising hormonal madness with Hermione and then the terrific revelation from his godfather. He shook his head ruefully at his godfather's confessions.

"Are you my father?"

Sirius looked away fearfully, his eyes wide in shock, "I don't know what you're talking ab—"

Harry threw up his hands in frustration and hissed angrily, "Damn it Sirius, you're lying! You're supposed to be the one person on my side! How could you hide something like this from me?"

Sirius hung his head in shame, "Harry, you have to understand I – it was a very complicated time back then and your parents – well, you see..."

"Just tell me this Sirius, honestly, if my Mum never loved my Dad, why did she have to cheat on him with his best friend? And WHY DO I LOOK LIKE BLEEDING JAMES POTTER IF YOU'RE MY FATHER?" He exploded, breathing deeply.

The ex-convict was thunderstruck at his questions and he plainly walked up to his face and –

SLAP!

"Don't you ever talk about your mother like that! Lily was an amazing person, she sacrificed her life for you!" He was seething, "And for what? So that she could raise a coward who ran away? Don't think for a minute I believed that shit-filled letter you left me! 'Its best for everyone', 'I don't want you to be hurt because of me'. I'm a wanted fugitive Harry, if Voldemort found me it would be a mercy as compared to the Ministry."

He had tears streaming down his eyes and Harry's head was downcast, his glasses having fallen off when he was struck.

"Your mother was the most virtuous and honest person I had the pleasure of knowing and your father was a great man! You are their son, but... but you're also mine and Lily's son by magic." He said quietly.

"How do you mean?" He asked despite himself.

Sirius gave him a succinct explanation of the Ritual of Magical Adoption and explained to him that his biological parents would stay

the same, but by magic he was now officially a Black. The Potter family magic had died with James Potter, the last of his line, and so had his stag animagus form.

"You have to understand Harry, those were dark times. Lily and James were like a beacon of hope because they had you. Lily freely discussed having at least two more before you were seven. I... I thought that the Potter family magic could live on in their other children. But you Harry, you were my only hope." He was gasping at straws to get his point across.

"I have no idea what you mean Sirius. Why was I your only hope?" He was truly confused.

He took a deep breath, wiped away his tears and answered, "Inermia. It is a virus Harry, a disease growing among the pureblooded households. One in every six children gets it, it is a repressed genetic disorder; I got it in my generation. I cannot have children Harry. You were one year old when my brother Regulus died childless in the service of the Dark Lord. There was no other Black son left, but me. The name of Black would die with me."

"So you went behind my parents' backs and did this to keep your family name alive?" He spluttered angrily.

"No Harry!" He disabused that notion immediately, "Not my family name, my family magic. The Blacks are one of the oldest lines, we date back all the way to the time of Merlin and the Arthurian Knights. Over the centuries, powerful witches and wizards have married into and been born in our line. The fact that in recent times, many of them went Dark does not understate the power that they inherited. To hold the magic of the Black line is a great asset. The Potters were a powerful Light family, but they were barely a few centuries old, they would have made you strong, but it is the magic of the Blacks that has made you powerful!"

"So... you wanted to make me more powerful? More gifted?" He pieced together that explanation, "Why?"

The animagus hesitated, but then pressed on, "Because Harry, by prophecy and Oracle, you have been chosen to be the slayer of this Dark Lord Voldemort. There is a prophecy recorded in the bowels of the Department of Mysteries in the Ministry of Magic. Dumbledore

never revealed its contents to any of us, but we all know that it states that in the end it comes down to Voldemort and you. You're fated to be a warrior and I wanted to make you, my godson, my son, have the best chance of survival."

He was shocked, his face was pale and his palms were sweaty, "Is that why Voldemort attacks me, why he targets me?"

"He doesn't know the whole prophecy Harry, just a part of it, he wants that knowledge and that is the reason he hasn't been greatly active these past few months, he is waiting to hear it before finalizing his plans." He explained patiently.

He sat down on the forest floor, it was all a bit overwhelming, "Me or him..." he mused, "I guess somewhere in my mind I already knew that it would end up being like that, I just never realized it was that specific and preordained."

He chuckled mirthlessly and Sirius sat down beside him, a hand over his shoulder and drew him in a one-armed hug. They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, recomposing themselves after these disturbing revelations and major shocks.

"What now Harry? Are you coming back?" Sirius questioned.

"Not yet," He answered resolutely, "Sirius I am learning and I am preparing where I am, just give me some time, a little more time and I'll be ready to come home."

He looked torn but seeing the resolve in his godson's eyes he complied, with one condition, "Write to me more often Harry, I was going spare with worry these past few months."

He smiled his first smile that evening, "I will, but its time I left, before they find me."

He seemed reluctant but stood up with him and gave him a tight hug, "You take care of yourself pup."

His smile vanished and he looked annoyed, "Pup? Since when do you get off calling me 'pup'?"

He shrugged, "You are my son, sort of at least, it fits..."

He looked unimpressed, "I swear to you Sirius if you ever call me 'pup' again I will never speak to you nor write to you ever again."

"Duly noted."

Harry reached the Amanta's home and knocked genially, she let him in. He put his shoes by the entrance and came into the foyer. She stood in the centre with her wand drawn and pointed towards him.

"I see you got away fine, no blaring alarm bells along the way."

"I did Amanta," He agreed, "What are we doing today?"

"Today we start with the interesting portion of your training Harry: Enchantment-Transfiguration-based duelling. Don't worry, I'll go easy on you." She said with a predatory grin.

Harry gulped involuntarily, he suddenly felt very, very frightened.

To make things crystal clear: James and Lily Potter are Harry's biological parents that is why it is okay and expected of Harry to look like James and Lily. But by MAGIC, Harry is the son of Sirius Black and Lily Potter, so he has his mother's inherent magic and the magic of the Black line. The family magic of the Potters, for all intents and purposes is LOST! The reason Sybil had all the Trelawney magic and the magic from her adoptive mother's line as well was because both Nicholas III and Mary Trelawney performed the ritual on baby Sybil, but in Harry's case, ONLY Sirius performed the ritual and in essence, took over James' place as Harry's father. Lily still remains his mother by Nature AND Magic.

To "Heeroyuyz"

You made some valid points in your review:

Q. "Why the hell isn't Harry furious at Sirius for destroying the Potter legacy?"

Ans. He is angry, but there is anger and then there is pure shock that just makes you stop. I can assure you Harry and Sirius'

relationship has suffered as unimaginable blow because of this act of betrayal. Although, there isn't much of a Potter legacy as compared to the Black legacy. Sirius was doing right by his godson in his own twisted way, or so he thought.

Q. "I call bullshit that older blood makes you more powerful, that's been shown throughout the entire series to be false, and you've contradicted your early referencing in the chapter."

Ans. Sirius honestly believes that his older blood makes Harry more powerful, but that's not entirely true in the context that you understood. "Powerful" isn't referring to Raw magical power, "powerful" is referring to magical gifts like Metamorphmagi, Empathy, Telepathy, control of the Inner Eye to be a Seer or an Oracle, Animagi and anything else you can dream up. These, as per my AU, are hereditary traits, things that are common in magical bloodlines and not muggle-borns. Also if you read my Author Notes 3, you will find that there is a serious deficiency in the muggle-borns, it's one of the over-arching plots of this story. Those like Hermione and presumably Lily Potter are the rare exceptions not the rule.

Q. "You call this the road to freedom, but it just seems like Harry being led by Amanta and Sirius and Cassandra's hands and accepting what happens again."

Ans. It is the Road to Freedom, Road as in there is a journey, with an eventual destination, one he hasn't reached. From being exclusively under the control of the Order, Harry is being allowed to make decisions for himself: Cassandra manipulated Harry and it was Harry's own naiveté that he fell for her manipulations, he learnt from that experience, he's fifteen and still quite innocent, of course Cassandra led him on! Amanta has never manipulated Harry, but she did make it clear that she would protect him if the need arose, that's not controlling that's caring. Sirius made a bid to help Harry in a convoluted way nearly fifteen years ago. His controlling ways are pretty much so old that Harry can do nothing about it. What Harry is coming to learn in his journey is that Freedom isn't all about spending all his money and becoming angry and whiny at any infraction of his supposed freedom, it is that people will always affect your life, it depends on you to what degree you will let them and how mature you can be in any pressurizing situation. At fifteen, he still needs to be led to an extent.

Author Notes:

1. All the ideas for the pranks explained by Hermione in the beginning including the use of the seeds are all AU ideas.

2. The new way of using the Fidelius might anger some people, after all this is a serious fic and the Fidelius is a serious piece of magic. But like it was hinted at in the beginning, Hermione and the twins are a formidable team and they are working towards creating newer and easily applicable uses of important spells. Imagine the Fidelius used on Umbridge's bathroom to be an easier variant of the one used by Lily and James in Canon.

3. I don't know if anyone realized it because it was super, super subtle; but in the paragraph in the first scene through Hermione's ramblings where she discusses the allotment of Prefect positions: she mentioned that Sally-Anne Perks and Dean Thomas' grades were too abysmal to allow them to be Prefects. Dean and Sally-Anne (I assumed at least) are both muggle-born; there is a direct correlation here with the assertion that Hermione's brilliance is an exception and most definitely not the rule when it comes to the muggle-raised. Amanta had a lot of say about this in one of the previous chapters and this is just tacit proof of her ramblings. The muggle-borns are deficient in their use and application of magic in general... more on this later.

4. I liked writing that scene with Umbridge; personally I think its pretty humiliating to be forced to shit in a dustbin, especially for someone as prim, proper and stuck-up like Umbridge. I hope for some of you it was one of those: 'lol, suck it bitch' moments.

5. I understand that in the grand scheme of things, the pranks that the PA is playing seem juvenile and unimportant, these are schoolchildren we are talking about, granted schoolchildren with a vicious streak, but schoolchildren nonetheless. Though their pranks and attacks against Umbridge are having a positive effect for Hogwarts whereby Umbridge is finding it very difficult to consolidate her authority over the school because of being constantly undermined.

6. Harry handed the letters to Cassandra when she left at the end of the last chapter. She's been in Hogsmeade for a while as explained in the next scene so she just sent it across while she was in town.

7. Sacking Trelawney was originally a scene I wrote from Cassandra's perspective, but I found it was too hard and I wasn't able to encapsulate the emotions and complexities of a character like Cassandra in such a situation, so I held back and continued the following scene in Cassandra's narrative.

8. I hope the build up of Cassandra's family story is getting to you because trust me when I say this it just gets more and more convoluted. They say the Peverells were a cursed line, wait till they meet the Trelawneys in my verse.

9. Writing the death scene for Mr. Weasley was painful, but I tried portraying it the best I could, focussing more on his inner diatribe when it happened. Originally his narrative ended with regret after regret, but I wasn't happy with that at all. I asked my Mum what would be her greatest accomplishment and her greatest fear. She told me it was my sister and I, in her last moments, she might think of my Dad, but the only people on her mind without a doubt would be her children and that she was sure of. The line "there is no truer love than that of a parent for his (or her) child" is actually from my Mum.

10. Harry's work with animagus probably confirmed a lot of your suspicions, but I dropped a good hint about what it was all alluding to way in the beginning of the chapter before Tonks revealed it all.

11. Harry's work in potions is steadily improving and he will become decent at them, this doesn't mean he will be an outstanding genius; he's never really had much luck in the subject. Under the tutelage of Stefan he will discover he does have an instinctive understanding of the subject, but he is nothing spectacular, nowhere near Hermione's brilliance or his mother's supposed brilliance as per Slughorn.

12. The reason Harry didn't realize what was happening to Mr. Weasley in a dream this time was because he has been practising Occlumency regularly even after Cassandra left. He clears his mind every night before going to sleep and does his 'mental exercises', which keep the nightmares at bay. Consequently he didn't have a vision of Mr. Weasley being attacked.

13. In case some of you didn't realize it, S.C.C. is the Amanta's initials: Schimba cel Cumplit.

14. Well I hope that satisfies your curiosity about the Rosier subplot. At least for now. There's still the lingering question about why he didn't kill Dudley. But we've now established that there are agents in the government aware of Voldemort and willing to fight him. I always thought it was weird that Snape was the only definitive spy in the ranks of the Light and only under Dumbledore's thumb. So here are some other spies, keep your eyes peeled; there are holes in the Dark Lord's servers hitherto unknown.

15. I'd love to hear about some of your views about the Department of Mysteries assigning a Death Eater-turned-Spy the assignment of killing the Minister of Magic. I like to think its some kind of poetic justice.

16. If you're wondering I decided to model my version of what the Department of Mysteries does around the version explained in *Altered Destinies* by DobbyElfLord. You should read it if you have the time, it's a wonderful time-travel story.

17. Any guesses on the identities of Agents Black, Gold and Silver? Hint: Gold and Silver aren't central to the story and unless a viable opportunity (read: somewhat brilliant stroke of genius) doesn't arise, I won't reveal who Gold and Silver are, but Black is an integral part of the story, or one of the growing subplots of the story anyway.

18. Arthur's funeral was really difficult to write. I know I was getting ahead of myself, but in my mind Mr. Weasley was always such a good man as he was portrayed in Canon, I just felt like I was trying to do him justice. I decided to spin Amos Diggory as his good friend as it was a reasonable assumption that they were good friends if not best friends as I portrayed them to be.

19. Writing what Molly had to say was complex, because she is a woman more of heart and soul and less of mind and logic. But I wanted to portray Molly as more than just an overtly maternal figure that cries in the background, I wanted to see that side of Molly Weasley that JKR saw when she made Molly takedown Bellatrix Lestrange in *DeathHallows*. I wanted to present that shade of maternal yet Gryffindor Molly. I hope it worked.

20. In Canon we all knew Ron had jealousy issues and some serious parental issues as well. Its not easy being the youngest son

in a large household. He definitely harboured some bitterness towards his father, more subconscious than anything else. But I decided to try to bring that to the surface. The Ron scene was one of the clincher phases of Ron's life when he grows up a little more. He finally told Hermione how he felt.

21. I hope you guys are curious about Harry and Hermione's irrational reaction to each other. It's something of a long-term plan that will work wonders in complicating the Trio's relationship. It does have a reason, but don't expect that reason to become obvious anytime soon.

22. I'm sure after reading that whole bit about Cassandra, it was pretty expected was Sirius had done and Tonks revealed it. I thought there was some ironic justice in Harry getting away by giving the slip to the CONSTANTLY VIGILANT Mad-Eye Moody.

23. Life is going to go on for the Weasleys and Hermione, but they are all very shook up by what has happened. There will be reverberations that will be seen in chapters to come as they work together over the PA.

24. I hope you understood Sirius' reasons for doing what he did. It was by no means right and an infringement upon the trust that James and Lily bestowed upon him. But he just knew he had to do it. Something akin to a sixth sense and inexplicable instinct.

25. The 'pup' thing is something that just annoys me to an extent, every fanmade story involving Sisirus in a parental role feels like it's a responsibility for Sirius to call him 'pup' and Remus 'cub'. There is no mention of such a reference from either person in Canon and I see no reason to feel obligated to enforce it in Fanon. But that's just one of those little things that bug me, no offence to anyone who finds that cute or whatever.

26. I would like to make a formal apology for the sheer number of subplots and random things I throw into the mix that have little to nothing to do with the 'big picture' in the grand scheme of things, but these plot bunnies just assault me out of nowhere and refuse to leave until I pencil them in one way or another. At least I'm getting rid of Rosier in a chapter or two.

27. This was the longest chapter I've ever written and had TWENTY scenes in total! I'm very proud of it. Also this is the longest Author's Notes section I've ever written.

Again if you spot any grammatical errors and/or inconsistencies, PM me or leave it in a REVIEW and I will change it ASAP.

REVIEWS make me HAPPY! And if I get a LOT of reviews then I'll feel guilty for not updating sooner and then I'll be forced to update ASAP. So reviewing makes me write faster and guilt-trips me (which according to my sister is highly amusing to watch). In other words: REVIEW!

Thanks guys for sticking with A Road to Freedom, the words mark has already crossed 100k words and I am not even beginning to formulate the complexities of this story, the way I've planned it, it will go waaaay over 300k words in the end. Harry has a long, long way to go before his next return to England.

Thanks a bunch,

~ Gatonio.

CHAPTER SIX

OVER MY HEAD

And suddenly I become a part of your past,

I'm becoming the part that don't last,

I'm losing you and its effortless.

Without a sound we lose sight of the ground

In the throw around;

Never thought that you wanted to bring it down,

I won't let it go down till we torch it ourselves.

Everyone knows I'm in

Over my head,

Over my head;

With eight seconds left in overtime,

She's on your mind,

She's on your mind.

Over My Head ~ The Fray

A Day in the Life of a Teenage Wizard

Slash, jump, twirl and fire.

"Concentrate Neville, I want you to hit me now!"

Ron bellowed agitatedly as Neville ducked from the heavy onslaught of bright light headed in his direction. His face was covered in sweat but determination was shining in his eyes.

He jumped to the side as Neville's disarming jinx grazed his arm, his wand vibrated weakly, but he held on tightly, preventing Neville's victory.

Slashing his wand from side-to-side, Ron called upon one of the curses Hermione had recently taught them, "Sollicitudo!"

An invisible wave of energy flew in Neville's direction, but Neville managed to raise a shield quickly enough to block it out. Taking a sharp turn to the left, he bellowed out an angry, "Confringo!"

Ron jumped backwards. The ten-metre distance between him and his opponent was now extended to fifteen. The blasting hex smashed into the ground of the Room of Requirement, causing debris to be thrown violently in all directions.

Neville incanted a physical shield and blocked any of it from hitting him.

He took the initiative of throwing a spell at Neville. "Stupefy!"

Neville's shield was meant to hold off physical blows, not magical energy. His stunner easily bypassed the shield and hit Neville squarely in the chest.

His opponent keeled over unconscious; his shield fell with his loss of concentration. An immitigable barrage of stone debris hit Ron; his cheek was scraped by a particularly large rock, blood streaming down the flesh wound. His left arm was also forcefully smashed with another rock and his muscles were aching.

Nevertheless he stood tall and proud, victorious over his third opponent in a row.

The other members of the P.A. appeared from behind the screen the Room had conjured when Neville was out. Hermione rushed to Neville's side and checked him out for wounds. Although he was a little banged up, there was nothing a few, simple healing charms couldn't manage.

With a heavy sigh, he sat down on the spot he was standing in. His legs were beginning to give out. Having three consecutive duels was

taxing and he was more than a little tired now that the adrenaline was leaving his system. He knew he was about to crash.

Katie was bandaging up Neville while she sniffed disapprovingly - she was more than a little miffed that a fifth-year had handily beaten her in a fair duel, after he had been worn down by a duel with a seventh-year.

Hermione approached his side and sat down, her eyes boring into his own but he didn't look in her direction. Determined to at least exude a sense of nonchalance Ron smiled weakly.

"Duelling was a good idea Hermione, we should have started doing it sooner." He said in the way of making conversation.

She huffed and pushed his head back to get a good look at his neck where a smaller cut was oozing blood. He hissed in pain and clenched his teeth.

"Episkey!" He sighed in relief as the wound closed up and she put his head back straight, "Yes, duelling was a good idea. However, I suddenly feel it was a tad too pragmatic a decision to go off without a hitch. Do you realise that Angelina was still crying after I countered the Panic Curse on her?"

His eyes were downcast. "We are learning these spells for a reason Hermione, we are learning them to better ourselves and these situations are where we're supposed to use them. That doesn't of course excuse how harsh they are, but it doesn't excuse either their necessity."

She didn't respond but muttered a few more healing charms and a quick scourgify and he was as right as rain.

When she seemed satisfied with her efforts, she responded to his comments, "These spells are border-line dark Ron, it is very easy to tip the scales and fall beyond the abyss if you're not careful. Dark Magic is illegal for a reason. It consumes your spirit and taints your soul, and I don't think you'd fancy an afterlife in Perdition, so I would tell you to be careful."

She was about to withdraw her hand from his shoulder when he caught hold of it in a firm grip, "Don't you think I know Hermione?

Don't you think I understand? I grew up in the Wizarding World; I was brought up with all the horror stories of what happened to Dark Wizards and how they would never survive. I know that a Dark Wizard's path ultimately leads to Tartarus, trust me when I say this, I will not make that mistake."

She was slightly taken aback by his vehemence but nodded nonetheless.

Fred and George took over the meeting while she was tending to Ron and they gave some pointers and final instructions to everyone before they started dispersing from the Room in twos like they did after every meeting. She stayed back because Ron's wasn't ready to leave yet.

He was just sitting by the fireplace created by the Room and staring into the flames despondently.

She stood on the other side of the room under the grand archway that welcomed any new visitors, staring at him sadly.

"Hermione?" One of the twins approached her.

She was distracted from her stupor and she regarded him with curiosity, "Oh...um...yeah?"

He smiled mischievously, "It's Fred, unless you prefer George?"

She smiled back, embarrassed. "Sorry Fred, what was it you wanted to say?"

He leaned back against the archway looking right at her, "Well I was going to ask you if you were ready to leave yet? It's almost lights-out and as much as I revel in the newer, more rebellious you, I rather not tempt Umbridge and the Inquisitorial Squad."

She smiled back at him, "Why Fred," she said in mock-surprise, a hand on her heart, "Are you worried about little old me? Oh however will I repay your courtesy?"

Fred swatted at her smiling widely, "Don't be a prat Hermione. Merlin, I never thought I'd say those words. But if you can get mopey over there up, we can leave. George already left with Alicia."

Her smile waned when he mentioned Ron, "I think you better go ahead Fred, I'm going to spend some time with him. He needs to talk a bit more, at least I hope he wants to talk. He's been very tight-lipped since Harry left."

Fred's smile vanished and he looked a bit annoyed, "You see that's what I find unbearable; he's not the only one who lost his father. Ginny, George, Percy, Bill, Charlie and I did too. You don't see us moping about like him."

Her lips thinned, "Everyone grieves at their own pace Fred. You can't speed it up or slow it down. It happens as it is meant to happen."

He just shrugged, unsmiling he left with a garbled goodbye.

She looked at his retreating back with sadness. Fred was grieving too, whether he admitted it to himself or not.

Ron still hadn't moved an inch, having missed the entire byplay between his older brother and Hermione.

She let him stew for a few more minutes, hoping that he might be the one who called her to him. She took the time to try and sort out her own muddled thoughts.

Ever since the night of the funeral, she had been anything but sorted. Despite the gravity of the situation, when he had told her he loved her, he wasn't going to run anymore, not from her or anyone else, she had been elated. Finally, she got to hear the words she wanted to hear since the beginning of fourth-year. For the longest time she had given up hope of him ever realising he had feelings for her, but when he said those words, irrespective of the situation, irrespective of the problems they had or the ones they knew they would face, when he said 'I love you', Hermione knew that things would only get better from thereon out.

Then Harry happened. And oh, how he happened.

Needless to say that little stunt he had pulled with her left her mind in a whirl. She continually doubted herself and her feelings for Ron amidst those new, inexplicable emotions for Harry that were anything but platonic.

It had been two weeks since they returned to Hogwarts after the funeral and things had been very tense. The twins barely cracked a smile for the first week and Ginny was angrier than usual. All plans to prank Umbridge were halted as she and Ron worked tirelessly to come up with a new schedule to incorporate duelling into the P.A. sessions. Now they employed every single resource they had at their disposal and threw it into fighting.

Ever since the funeral, it finally hit them; the war had come home, one of their numbers was depleted and more were soon to follow.

They had to learn to fight, or perish for not even trying.

"Ron," she called hesitantly, still looking at him from across the room, "We need to leave, its almost lights-out."

His eyes never once flickered from the dancing flames in front of him.

"Do you reckon we could make a difference Hermione?" He asked, almost in a whisper.

She tilted her head to the side, her eyes wide in curiosity staring right at Ron's back; she wasn't quite sure what he meant.

"How do you mean Ron?"

He shrugged, still not turning around to look at her, "Do you reckon, all of this that we're doing: sneaking around, breaking rules, being a general nuisance to Umbridge, is any of it making any sort of difference?"

She leaned against the archway, turning away from Ron's direction and looking to the ceiling. It was a glorious picture the Room had painted above, it reminded her of Michelangelo's work in the Sixteenth Chapel in the Vatican.

"Yes, we are making a difference. Not a big difference, mind you, but whatever little we can do, we are doing it." Her eyes were staring

fixedly at the image of Adam's limp finger almost touching that of the Lord's for the spark of intelligence that created the basis of humanity.

"If we would have worked harder, would Dad still be alive?"

Had the Room not been perfectly silent, she would have missed his question, as it was entirely a whisper.

She wanted to answer 'yes', she wanted to tell him that what they were doing had they done it better, harder, Mr. Weasley would still be alive.

Alas, that was not the truth and Hermione Granger did not lie.

"No Ron, I don't think that would have happened." She answered apologetically.

There was silence for the longest time and then he said, "Oh."

Fed up with these endless talks filled with no substance and only awkward pauses, Hermione marched up to him and sat down beside him in front of the fireplace. He was keenly observing the last dying embers as the fire went out. She grabbed onto his collar and turned him around forcefully, tearing his eyes away from the hearth and directing his attention to herself.

"Ron, please, talk to me. Tell me what it is that is bothering you..." She pleaded with him.

His expression was blank, which was a frightening reality. Ron was generally a bastion of open expression, if not filled to the brim with emotion then generally overflowing. But ever since the funeral, something changed within him. Before Hermione could guess what he was feeling and sometimes what he was even thinking by just looking at his face. He was so simple, it was all written there so clearly. Now... Now he was complex, there were more layers to him, now he was conflicted, now he felt many things at one time and his expression was no longer lively and indicative of his emotions, his expression was blank and impossible to read.

A blank book offers no knowledge.

He raised three fingers and seemed to mentally tally a list, he pointed them at her, "Three things Hermione: My Dad died, my best friend came and disappeared again, the girl I love doesn't love me back."

Well, at least he retained his complete lack of subtlety.

"Ron I..." She began to explain herself.

"Don't Hermione," he cut her off immediately, "I put you in a very unfair position. You were comforting me, I was grieving, my father had just died and I told you that I love you. Of course you couldn't say you didn't love me back, you're too self-sacrificing to do that."

He stood up and started walking away as an unquantifiable barrage of emotions struck Hermione out of nowhere.

Hermione had decided that she could never really be with Ron a long time ago. The night of the Yule Ball after she returned to her dormitory, still distraught over his hurtful words and characteristic obliviousness, she had vowed never to be with Ron Weasley. In fact she being the rule abiding and organisation-loving creature she was, actually compiled a list and then burnt it up. But the reasons in there were wholly justified right until a moment ago.

Ron was so thoughtless.

...I put you in an unfair position...

When did he become so perceptive?

Ron was a prat who could never understand her complexity and ambition.

...I was grieving...

When did he grow up?

Ron was a silly boy who thought from one head and it wasn't the one atop his neck.

...I love you...

When did he start thinking from his heart?

In that moment she knew that she had misjudged Ron Weasley harshly. His thoughtlessness stemmed from his honesty and his simplicity was nurtured by his innocence. He could no longer afford to be honest, not even with himself and his innocence was snatched away from him.

But one thing had not changed since the day she met him on the Hogwarts Express until that day: Ron Weasley followed his heart and his heart loved...her.

She rose to her feet and walked towards him purposefully, all thoughts of Harry and confliction between the two boys were forgotten.

"Are you ready to leave Hermi—" he started to ask her when he was stopped by a vicious—

SLAP!

She slapped him...hard.

"RON, you prat!" She huffed out angrily, "I love you too! Satisfied?"

He was still nursing his jaw when his eyes widened at her words.

"Wha-?" He garbled out incoherently.

"I..." she took a deep breath and said it kindly, "I...love you."

She smiled shyly and he gave a large grin. Cautiously he intertwined his fingers with hers and she let him, her eyes dancing with excitement and nervousness, a faint blush reddening her cheeks.

"I'm glad..." he said in relief, "Because I couldn't imagine going on without you."

Bringing his head forward he gently took her lips with his own, it was sweet and tender as his somewhat dry lips pressed to her smoother ones.

He moved back in a second, and both their faces flushed.

With a flourish of his hand, he offered to escort her and she smiled widely as she took his offered arm.

At the back of her mind, a part of her was screaming, raging and fighting against the tiny little cage in the dark depths of the subconscious wardrobe she had been shoved into. A single thought echoed louder and louder, refusing to be silenced and only fuelled by her increasingly guilty conscience.

WHAT ABOUT HARRY!

A Day in the Life of a Teenage Witch

When she was a young girl, she had faced a number of social problems: primarily friendlessness characterised by a general disregard for her feelings and opinions by her peers. Her parents were sympathetic of course but they were floundering at trying to help her.

Hermione Granger's home-life wasn't exactly...orthodox.

Her parents were very different people. Of course she never doubted their love for her, but sometimes she wondered if they were forced together because of her. After all, her mother was hardly nineteen when she was born, but they brushed aside her comments and always assured her that they loved each other.

Irrespective of that fact, one thing was for certain, neither of them was prepared for a child when Hermione was born. They had learnt over the years, but for the longest time Hermione was taught to retain a certain amount of independence. She was always in charge of herself to a certain degree and her parents never disabused her of that notion because she never did anything to rouse their ire.

Thus was born her unquenchable need to grow up as soon as possible.

The reason: grown-ups were always right, grown-ups weren't gawked at or mocked for their competence and intellect, grown-ups were happier.

Then she discovered she was witch and the world tilted on its axis. She entered a new world that she only dreamed of, her childish curiosity bubbled over and for the first time in the longest time: Hermione Granger allowed herself to hope. Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry gave her hope for finding peers that would accept her, complement her and indeed encourage her.

Her hopes were dashed rather quickly.

It seemed no matter where she went, childishness and the stupidity of those her age would never leave her.

Harry Potter and Ron Weasley entered her life and a new, unbelievable facet was created in her single-dimensional view of the world. She then had friends. Two people she could trust, and indeed had trusted, with her life unquestioningly. She doubted she could ever be as candid even with her parents as she was with Harry and Ron. Those two boys, in a span of four-and-a-half years had become the most important people in her life.

Granted it wasn't sunshine and daisies exactly; Ron had a continual foot-in-the-mouth syndrome and Harry...well, Harry's problems were so beyond the scope of normalcy that it caused her to shiver involuntarily at the mere memory of some of the situations he had had to face in his life with or without her. But no matter whatever hardship or eventuality was thrown at them: be it academia, broomsticks, Triwizard Tournaments, rampaging Death Eaters, traitorous pets, evil Dark Lords; they always emerged at the end of the tunnel with a stronger friendship intact.

Last year had been the worst and best in many ways. Lord Voldemort returned but Harry came back alive no worse for wear. Ron deserted Harry, but came back and all was well in the world. She tried to decide if either of the boys in her life interested her in a romantic sense and she ultimately decided that their friendship was too important to jeopardise over something as trivial as possible romance. The fact that both boys were as thick as they came didn't exactly help matters either.

It had been so planned out, so weaved and chartered. She had decided: Ron was too immature and Harry was too unpredictable.

Then when had it all just gone to HELL?

Slamming down in her seat with a sigh Hermione rubbed her temples soothingly as her eyes, half-closed, tiredly roamed over the words of another heavy tome she unearthed in the library.

Chapter XVII

Involuntary Attraction

...The spell of Congruency performed by a witch or wizard upon another can be potent to an explosive extent. The requirements indicate that it is to be performed one hour before or after the sunset while the witch or wizard that is to be bewitched should have a healthy amount of novenschlaft within their bodily system for at least six hours...Once performed the spell creates an unbearable loquacious attraction between the bewitched and bewitcher...

She stopped reading and allowed her mind to fade back. Harry had entered Ron's room at nearly midnight; the sun had been set for hours already.

Perhaps, she mused to herself, he bewitched her before and it just kicked in when she saw him?

Her eyes returned to the thick text in front of her in search of an answer:

...The time lapse between the spell and the meeting of the involved parties should not be too long otherwise the spell's effect simply wears away due to disuse but it will cause a certain obsession on the part of the bewitched for the bewitcher while it is still in effect...

Well that didn't help much because Harry had barely crossed her mind a few times in straggling thoughts while she comforted Ron and the other Weasleys. Also, she doubted she ate anything six hours before midnight, let alone any novenschlaft, which was a spicy Italian herb rarely found in Britain. Dinner had been served at seven and she hadn't gotten around to eating until much later.

Sighing to herself, she rubbed her eyes with the back of her hands and then closed the thick tome knowing it was useless to her.

She carelessly tossed The Guide of the Desperate Wizard to his Witch's Heart on the growing pile of tomes on her table. That was the tenth useless book she found that day alone, she had been searching for three weeks then.

In the beginning, she had been certain that there must have been a reason that she felt...whatever it was she felt for Harry that night. The reaction she had had towards him and him her was just not normal by any stretch of the imagination.

She prided herself on the fact that she organised and arranged her thoughts routinely to take into account any new feelings that may be bubbling within her. Up until the moment she was rubbing her wet, clothed sex against Harry she had never harboured any such fantasy of her other best friend whatsoever.

There had to be another explanation.

A week ago she made up with Ron, she started bringing him out of his shell and finally, she admitted to herself and him that she was indeed in love with him too. She didn't doubt it, she knew it, she just implicitly knew that she loved Ron. There was no foul play, no second thoughts, no worrying, just pure feelings and the budding of new love.

The very moment she agreed to be with him, her plan to figure out whatever happened with Harry speeded up tenfold.

Yet everyday, more fruitless hours were spent in the library than the day before and she wasn't closer to figuring out the answer than she was before.

Everyday, the possibility that there was no more of an explanation beyond an explosion of repressed sexual tension and hormones was becoming more and more distinct.

But when it came to Hermione Granger, a non-answer was a wrong answer.

No matter what, Hermione was not one of those girls, who liked two boys at once, who played with their feelings and relished in the power and control.

She groaned and covered her face with her hands; at least she hoped she wasn't that kind of girl.

CHIME!

The loud sound of the school bell indicated that Lunch hour had ended and the next class was beginning in a few minutes. She quickly got out of her favourite seat in the library. She was about to start rampaging through the shelves to put the borrowed books back when she slapped her forehead at her own stupidity, was she a witch or not?

With a practiced swish the ten tomes returned to their rightful places on the shelves and she gathered her inkwell, quill and sparse parchment, before heading towards Transfiguration with Ravenclaw.

With just a minute to spare, she quickly entered the classroom at the end of the rush of the students. She saw Ron excitedly wave his hand and indicate the seat beside him in dead centre of the classroom.

That was the compromise they had come up with because she wanted to sit ahead and he was comfortable behind, middle ground. As she took her seat beside the gangly redhead who was technically her boyfriend now, she couldn't help but smile. Would she ever be able to attain any 'middle ground' with Harry? Could there ever be 'middle ground' with Harry or would circumstances simply favour him as they always did?

Smiling, she intertwined her fingers with Ron's and gave him a chaste peck on his cheek, viciously squashing down the guilt that she was becoming more and more adept at avoiding everyday she was with him.

"Settle down class," Professor McGonagall called out and all conversation ceased. "Thank you, today we will be discussing Rotemper's theory on Conjuraton while keeping in mind Cherkovsky's fundamental principle underlying spatial shifts and matter exchanges..."

The lecture passed with nothing worthy of note. She took diligent notes and answered the Professor's questions when she was called upon. He would surreptitiously look longingly at her while pretending

to be taking notes and she would further pretend not to notice his blatant stares in order to not hurt his fragile male ego (because men did not stare longingly!). Another example of their outstanding middle ground achieved.

However at the end of class...

"Ms. Granger, would you stay behind a few minutes?" Professor McGonagall asked her as the class was filing out.

"I'll wait for you outside," Ron said without preamble and she smiled at his newfound chivalry.

She approached the Professor's desk and stood waiting patiently while McGonagall wrote something on a piece of parchment. When she seemed satisfied with her efforts, she looked up and regarded her with a rare, fond smile.

"Ms. Granger, I have an opportunity I would like to extend to you." She started cordially.

"Yes Professor?" she asked curiously.

"I'm sure you have come across in your readings at some point the Guilds of Magic?"

She nodded mechanically, "The Guilds of Magic were the united front of high-ranking societies created by the scholars of the age in their respective magical fields. At present, there exist Guilds for Transfiguration, Enchantment, Natural Philosophy, Potions, Alchemy, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, Astronomy and Spell-Craft and a minor Guild that was recognised in the last decade of Voodoo." She rattled off her impressive knowledge on instinct.

McGonagall nodded proudly, "Indeed, I am glad I do not need to fill you in. Now, as you know Ms. Granger, the Guilds are designed to cater to the needs of the Old Ways. Before the institution of Magical Schools such as Hogwarts, magic was taught one-on-one from Master to Apprentice. When Masters felt that their Apprentices had reached a certain level of proficiency, they were tested by the Guild in which they apprenticed and depending on their performance, were marked as Journeymen. The International Confederation of Wizards created the examinations of OWLs and NEWTs, which is

what we abide by in Britain and much of the western world. Nevertheless, a number of magical institutions in the East tend to prepare their students for both ICW examinations and the Guilds."

She was confused with the direction of the conversation and the Professor smiled widely.

"Every year we send one outstanding student for each subject to a Guild for commendation. In the foundational subjects of Transfiguration, Potions, Astronomy and Natural Philosophy which is a combination of Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures, we pick a fifth-year student and for the others we pick a seventh-year."

Her eyes widened when she knew what McGonagall was about to ask her.

"I would like for you to be the Hogwarts Apprentice to the Transfiguration Guild this year."

She was still in a daze when she left McGonagall's classroom. In all honesty, she was giddy with excitement, what an honour it would be to be the Hogwarts Apprentice!

"Hey Hermione, wait!" A voice called out to her and she turned to see Ron's huffing face.

"Forgot I was waiting did you?" The big smile on his face belied the lack of any sting in his words.

Hermione could barely contain herself, "Oh Ron! I have wonderful news! Professor McGonagall wants me to perform in front of the Transfiguration Guild for commendation as a Journeyman, I guess Journeywoman, transfigurationist!"

"Sorceress," he corrected her with a large smile, "You would be a Journeywoman Sorceress. Hermione, that is brilliant news!"

"Oh bother!" She said dismissively.

He pecked her on her lips and then gave her a bear hug that she readily allowed herself to be engulfed in while she revelled in her newfound success.

Once they separated they set out on a leisurely pace towards the Great Hall (they had a free period), Hermione had a bounce in her step, but Ron seemed...anxious. She stopped and pulled him into an empty classroom they passed by. Closing the door, she locked it with a muffled Colloportus and looked at him shrewdly.

"Out with it!"

He backed away, "Its nothing Hermione, I'm happy for you...honest."

She sighed and put her hands on her waist, "What is it, Ron? We can talk about anything, you know that, so out with it."

He looked to the ground, "I don't want to rain on your parade Hermione, but, well, have you thought about how you're going to manage preparing for it?"

She pursed her lips because in reality, she hadn't thought about preparations, at all. She was heading into full-blown panic. She halted her thoughts and maintained a haughty expression.

"Of course Ron, I'll ask Professor McGonagall if there's anything in specific I should be concentrating on. She told me she would be with me through it all."

He nodded vigorously, "I don't doubt that Hermione. What I mean to say is, do you know the details of what goes into preparing for a Guild performance?"

She shrugged because she didn't, she had only ever read about the Guilds out of fascination and then too lightly, they were obsolete in Britain after all.

"Hermione the Guilds take months to prepare for. I know because Bill was made an offer in his seventh by Professor Babbling to perform in front of the Runic Guild. It drove him spare! Besides all the magic that needs to be practiced, there is endless amounts of theory, a lot of it you probably haven't heard of because they never even touch upon it at Hogwarts as its not part of the ICW curriculum. He thought he'd make a fool of himself at the Guild showdown but the only reason he got his commendation as a Journeyman Runic Artist was because there was a massive practical test that was

shoved on all the apprentices out of the blue." Ron seemed like he was only getting started.

She was flabbergasted by all this news being hurled at her, at moments like this she truly felt like an outsider in the Wizarding World.

"There's also these strange rules and traditions that are really old that you have to follow when you're performing. Like speaking in a certain way and addressing the Masters in a special way at different occasions and all that. Also they're a bit... well you know..." He shrugged uncomfortably.

"They're a bit what?" She asked in a firm voice, surprised that it didn't waver.

"Hermione!" he said with wide eyes looking at her like this should be something obvious, "You know!"

She ground her teeth ominously, she hated not knowing something that was apparently obvious, "No Ron, I don't know."

"Hermione, there's a reason they started schools for magic and the Master-Apprentice practice went out of fashion. Masters almost never took on muggle-borns and poor half bloods. Those that were apprenticed, almost never got commendation from any of the Guilds. With schools and the ICW curriculum, muggle-borns finally got a chance to shine that was impossible under the Guilds." He stopped seeing her red-faced expression, "Bill reckons that of the nineteen apprentices there when he went, he was one of the three that got commendation, and all three who did get it though were purebloods."

Not a word was exchanged, he shifted nervously, his eyes on the floor and Hermione simply tried to process everything he just told her.

Her hand clenched into a fist and tears moistened her eyes, "So no matter how hard I try, you're saying I could never be a Sorceress because I'm muggle-born?"

"NO!" He opposed vehemently, "I'm just telling you what generally happens at the Guilds, because I don't want you to be disappointed

and doubt yourself Hermione. Also well, I guess I hoped you might turn down McGonagall..."

Her eyes snapped in his direction, "Why would I turn her down?"

He answered honestly, "We have OWLs this year Hermione, they are what really matter in our country and we have the," he whispered, "DA," then went back to a normal decibel, "and Umbridge to survive. In-between all that you will have to learn all these traditions and requirements for an award that you probably won't get because of blood-obsessed snobs judging you. I mean is it really worth it? It won't be the smart decision Hermione, you have to prioritise."

His reasoning was definitely sound, pity it wasn't so clear in general; his essays' marks would soar at the very least.

"I have to do this Ron," She answered after a few seconds of contemplation.

His eyes were wide, "Why Hermione? It's just stupid to—"

She cut him off, "I have to Ron! I have to show them that my background and parentage makes not an ounce of difference because I am a witch and a thumping good one!"

He looked resigned, "Do whatever you want Hermione, I just want what's best for you, even if you don't realise it."

She humphed in annoyance, "You just don't understand Ron!" She threw her hands in the air and huffed, "After all this time, more than four years of friendship! You still don't understand me!"

He stomped his foot and took a step forward, ire evident in his eyes, "Why did I do? I'm trying to help you understand what you've signed up for! This is the thanks I get?"

She looked away, "You just...urgh! Ron... I work hard, I study, I try and I try and I try to prove myself to everyone. Do you know how much pressure that is? Do you have any idea how many people have asked me why I'm not in Ravenclaw? Do you know why the Sorting Hat put me in Gryffindor?"

He looked nonplussed and she answered, her voice rising until she was screaming, "It's because I was obsessed with proving the world wrong, defying everyone's logic and forging my name in history! I still am obsessed with doing so. That is what defines me as Gryffindor, which is why I rush to help the downtrodden like the House-Elves! If I back down because they won't approve of me at this precious Guild of theirs, well they better sit up and watch because I'll give them a BLOODY performance they haven't ever seen!"

His nose was literally touching hers and his eyes were wide in shock at her outburst. She was breathing deeply and he was just nodding slowly.

"Okay, I understand now, relax Hermione... We'll figure the little things out together."

He hugged her and she let him, her head lying on his shoulder as she recovered from a confession that she had never made to anyone ever before. Despite the gravity of the situation, she couldn't help but grace a small smile as she thought fondly: middle ground, something that she shared exclusively with Ron.

With Harry that would...

Like a spark in a darkened room, a drop of rain in a drought, Hermione had a spectacular moment of clarity.

With Harry...she'd never need middle ground, they were always on the same page. He understood her, sometimes better than she understood herself...

...Is that why she had feelings for him?

Did she just admit she had feelings for him?

Ron led her out of the classroom, hand-in-hand, her new resolve to love him and him alone already gone with the wind...

Now what was she supposed to do?

She sighed to herself in tiredness.

Back to the library it was...

There's More to Magic

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

On and on the little instrument moved, its pendulum swinging from side-to-side, recreating the sounds of a grandfather clock. It moved calmly, patiently, never once wavering.

BLEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEP!

Steam bellowed madly from the surface of the instrument and garnered the attention of the aging wizard on the other side of the room. The wizard swept aside his long trail of white hair and approached the whizzing instrument in curiosity.

He brandished his wand: long, slender and deep black in colour, the very essence of Elder. The alarming whiz of the instrument came to a startling stop and the old wizard stroked his beard in consternation.

He waved his wand over the instrument and it lit up in bright colours, the colours flashed quickly and seemed to form a series, a secret pattern. Half-moon spectacles lowered to a twisted nose as bright blue eyes twinkled in delight.

It seemed like they had a lead.

Hurrying from his office, the old wizard picked up the floo-powder tumbler lying on the mantelpiece and threw some floo powder into the dying embers of his fire. A large wall of green fire burst into life and he entered the fire without hesitation.

"Headquarters."

In a flash his body disappeared in a disconcerting blur of green flames and soot. He kept his body rigid and unmoving as he was forcefully hurled through various tunnels and tumbles that comprised the efficient floo-system.

With another large burst of green flame in front of him, he was spewed out of the fireplace in the ancestral home of the Noble and

Most Ancient House of Black. Gracefully, he landed on his feet and with a swish of his wand, the soot and dust disappeared from his robes, leaving him clean as before.

He followed the well-worn path down the fireplace in relative silence so as not to disturb the portrait of Walburga Black and headed into the kitchen where he could hear the visibly heated argument underway.

The door to the kitchen opened on its own accord and he slipped through without further preamble, entering just at the very moment that his Potions' Master chose to expound his views on Sirius' sensibilities rather colourfully.

"I have no more time to waste on your stupidity Black! All we need is one hair and we can finally get Potter back. Wouldn't your melodramatic Gryffindor heart just warm over at the mere thought of what I know will be a vomit-inducing, tearful reunion?" Snape growled out while still maintaining that silky quality in his voice that he so admired.

He cleared his throat and gathered all attention to himself thereby cutting off any further arguments.

"Good heavens Albus, when did you get in?" Molly Weasley asked with a hand on her chest.

He nodded respectfully towards Mad-Eye who was sitting in the back of the room, suspiciously not a part of the argument.

"Alastor was kind enough to let me know that the location potion was complete and Severus and Sirius were having a spot of disagreement." He said jovially.

Alastor snorted into his tea, "Really Albus, you have a gift for the understatement."

Choosing to ignore his comment for the time being, he focused his attention to the angry, ex-convict.

"Sirius, would you like to tell us why you refuse to cooperate?" He asked keeping the underlying threat out of his voice.

Sirius squared his shoulders and determination set into his posture causing him to sigh mentally, he knew what it was like arguing with a stubborn Gryffindor when he was determined about something.

"Albus it wouldn't be right! I spoke to Harry, wherever he is, and he is getting along fine. He is learning and I can imagine that studying without a constant threat of death looming over your head can be mightily relieving. He doesn't want to come back yet, but he has promised me he will when he is ready." Sirius said as calmly as he could manage.

Severus snorted, "Does the boy honestly expect us to keel over and wait for his Highness to decide to make an appearance?"

The animagus looked ready to pounce but was held back by a firm arm on his shoulder by his friend Remus.

"We don't need your vitriol Severus, attempt to curtail it because it is not helping anyone." The werewolf said in a quiet voice.

He had to admire the resolve and patience of the werewolf.

"Remus is correct Severus, kindly refrain from speaking further in this situation." He said dismissively.

"But Headmaster I—"

"Severus." Was all he had to say and the Potions' Master closed his mouth and retreated to a corner fuming.

"Now Sirius, what makes you believe that Harry is actually learning anything? More than that: do you honestly believe that this tumultuous time – when he has just witnessed the death of a friend and seen the very same murderer resurrect from the dead – is the best time for introspection away from those he loves?" He appealed to Sirius' rationality and emotional attachment to his godson, well, technically son now.

Sirius was shaken by his words but marshalled on, "He is fine Albus. He is dealing with his troubles better than he would have had he been here, surrounded by memories that haunt. Especially now when the Ministry is conspiring against him and that vile woman teaching at school, no, it is best that he stay away."

He soldiered on, "Nevertheless Sirius, what of his friends that he needs as much as they need him? What of the fact that he is in constant danger and sooner or later Voldemort will find him? He can hide all he wishes to Sirius, but the prophecy will catch up to him ultimately. Would you want him facing these unknown dangers without us to protect him and coach him? Also, wherever he is, how do you even know that his education, his living arrangements, the people he may or may not surrounding himself with are trustworthy and will not reveal some secret of his to his detriment? So many unknown variables Sirius..."

He sat down heavily in the kitchen chair and Remus patted his back, his eyes were wide in sadness and thought, "He promised to write me..." He muttered weakly.

Albus came forward and sat down in front of him, taking his shivering hand in his own, "Sirius, it has been weeks since you last spoke to him, has he written once?"

He knew this was an unfair question to pose because as he shook his head to indicate the negative. Silent tears fell from his eyes and he looked broken.

"What if something sinister happened Sirius? There is no way we can help him because we are here waiting for a letter that is never to come."

"I... Albus, please! Just a few more days, give me until the end of the week Albus, if he doesn't write I'll give my hair, I'll further the potion along willingly!" He was grasping at straws.

"Enough is enough Sirius!" Molly Weasley boomed and he closed his eyes in resignation, he was hoping to avoid a tirade from her, as it would be counterproductive.

"It has been weeks, he hasn't written once, not once!" She was breathing deeply, "We love him too Sirius, I love him with all my heart, as if he were one of my own. Arthur... loved him too... just as much. I would've given my life to have him back in a heartbeat!"

She yelped in frustration and took out her wand, "I'll take your bloody hair myself! Strand by strand if I have to!"

He raised his hand ready to intercede if necessary as Sirius dove for his wand in retaliation.

Thankfully Severus spoke up, "As much as I would love to see you do that Molly, I'm afraid it doesn't work that way. This potion involves as much inherent magic as you can possibly imagine. The memento of a relative must be given willingly, if not so, the potion froths and stains the cauldron, rendered useless."

He smiled gratefully in his direction for heading off an unnecessary confrontation.

"Molly, as much as we all subscribe to your passionate point of view, it won't be advisable. I suggest you calm yourself and put away your wand, this behaviour is unbecoming of you." The Headmaster said commandingly and the Weasley matriarch knew it wasn't a suggestion.

"Sirius," she said once her wand was out of sight, "Let us bring him back home, he may have faced unimaginable odds, but he is still a boy, a fifteen-year-old, scared boy who feels the world is plotting against him and as much as it hurts me to say so, his paranoia is justified. He needs support and love from us, he needs us and not the hollow platitudes from strangers he has surrounded himself with, assuming he hasn't cut off entirely from the world." She was still visibly distressed but she bit back her anger and tried to be rational.

Albus was proud by her dialogue; it was just the push that was needed to make Sirius comply.

Sirius looked pained, he truly felt as if he was in pain.

Without another word he rose from his seat and walked towards the mouth of the cauldron in the centre of the dinner table. A silent tear streamed down his eye as he raised his wand to the side of his head and slashed off a single strand.

All eyes in the room were upon as the various members of the Order beheld his final decision.

"I'm sorry Harry..." He whispered into the room though everyone heard him.

The single strand of black hair fell into the cauldron of bubbling white potion. As soon as it broke the surface, the potion seemed to acquire a life of its own and sucked it in, the pearly white sheen of the potion, turned it from transparent to opaque. It frothed and changed from white to beige to pink to yellow to orange to red, seemingly going through all the colours of the spectrum until it halted at an indeterminable shade of purple.

From within the increasingly bubbling depths, a solid slab of cauldron floated up to the surface and the potion began draining itself into the blank slab. As the level of the liquid diminished, writing began appearing on the slab, when the entire potion seemed absorbed; the writing reached its most distinct stage.

No one dared to breathe as the animagus gently lowered his hands into the cauldron and pulled out the slab, observing it slowly. His eyes checked the details and then widened.

"That was unexpected." He mumbled.

As one all the occupants of the room burst into a flurry of motion and approached Sirius and looked over his shoulder, exclamations were made and more than one witch or wizard simply looked put out and disappointed.

The Headmaster waited for the excitement to die before summoning the cauldron slab to him as Molly rushed to his side to read it as well.

Harry James Potter

Fillius of

Sirius Orion Black

Et

Lily Ròs Evans Potter

Quinque thousand, six centum quod Quadraginta-Septem dies.

Locus

Tutis

"My Latin is rusty Albus but I know that 'locus' means location, but what is 'tutis'?" She asked hurriedly, voicing the similar question from some of the others present.

He looked grave, he felt older, "It means unknown Molly."

Sirius barked in laughter, she squealed in frustration and Severus snorted, the others looked on in resignation having been returned back to square one of their search.

"Should give the lad points fer bein' thorough." Moody commented idly as he drank from his flask.

"Unfortunately I do not think this is of Harry's doing." He mused quietly.

"How do you mean Albus?" Remus asked trying to puzzle an answer from the clear 'unknown' given on the slab, "I haven't the foggiest how this helpful."

"Counter-reasoning Remus," He said returning some of his joviality, "There is only one reason why the object of the locus parentis potion would yield such an answer. You see this potion is geared towards finding its object through magic, which is connected between generally a parent and his or her child. In Harry's case, James did not appear on this result because by magic, he is not Harry's father, Sirius is. This form of magic can only be subverted when the child has somehow diverted the ebb of his magic to someone else. Essentially, the child has declared allegiance due to a parent to someone else."

The scarred Auror growled, "There's the most obvious answer Albus, the boy found himself a Master. It makes sense."

"A... master?" Molly asked weakly.

He nodded, "In times of old, the underage wizard or witch would submit to a Master or Mistress in a magical field to gain tutelage. Their Master or Mistress would then uphold the role of parentis for the wizard or witch. While still connected to his natural or in Harry's

case magical parents, his location can only be revealed by magical means by leave of his Master or Mistress."

"So Harry has made himself an Apprentice?" Remus asked the obvious.

Severus sneered, "The boy isn't behaving as foolishly as I expected. Instead of festering as a muggle and waiting for an open attack, he is actually doing something, this explains his earlier comments to his friends about learning more, but the question begs: what exactly is he learning and from whom?"

Nobody seemed to have an answer to this question.

"I have some floo calls to make," He said breaking the silence, "Everyone is to return to their posts and I will provide an update when necessary. Thank you for your presence and time today."

Slowly they filed out and he flooed back to Hogwarts. Once enshrined in his office, surrounded by his odd implements and the mutterings and occasional snores from his predecessors' portraits, he bent down and looked towards his fireplace.

With a pinch of floo powder in hand he called out, "Magus Guild of Transfiguration."

He stuck his head in the flames and waited patiently for the whirling of his surroundings to stop. When it did, he looked expectantly into the environs of the lavish, yet elegant décor of the Welcoming Room of the Transfiguration Guild.

"Alexandra," he called out calmly to the young witch sitting behind a desk, reading through a magazine.

She immediately sat up and looked at the wizard calling her, her cheeks flaming in embarrassment at being caught not doing her job.

When seeing it was him, she blushed evermore, "Greetings Grand Sorcerer Dumbledore, how may I be of service today?" She asked in impeccable English with only a vague hint of her Spanish accent.

"Kindly compile a list of all the applicants this year that are scheduled to perform in front of the Masters' Council for

Journeyman status and owl it to me immediately please." He said authoritatively.

She nodded quickly and wrote it down on a piece of parchment.

With a few more instructions given, he withdrew his head from the fireplace and sighed. That was one roster down; he was merely assuming Harry would attempt a Transfiguration test in front of the Guild if his Master or Mistress arranged it. He still had to speak to the other Guilds where getting the rosters would be extremely difficult as compared to the Transfiguration Guild. His status of Grand Sorcerer was something the Ministry could not strip from him, as it was something he earned, but it only gave him leverage in the Transfiguration Guild and nowhere else.

He mentally compiled a list of all the favours he would have to call in, in order to gain access to those lists in the other Guilds. He would definitely have to look through the Enchanters' Guilds, the Natural Philosophers' wasn't too far a stretch either and maybe even Astronomy and for the sake of thoroughness: Potions. Although he doubted the latter two were of any interest to Harry, it was prudent to check.

Of course, this was all based on the assumption that Harry's Master or Mistress would want him to perform in front of a Guild at all.

Rubbing a weary hand on his brow, he further compounded this assumption on the assumption that Harry actually had a Master or Mistress, it was very likely that his magic was simply not responding to the test: an unlikely hypothesis when considering the average witch or wizard but when matters concerned one Harry Potter, the unlikely is where one began searching.

Despite the considerable odds against him, Albus was inspired to try anyway because for the first time in months, there was an inkling of finding Harry Potter.

I'll get you back Harry, I will save you, even if you don't realise it yet...

The Mysteries of Azkaban

With great caution, the lone wizard pulled up his black hood and applied a glamour charm on his face, distorting it from all recognition. He cast a few more spells to complete his disguise by changing his voice and the appearance of his height and body-type. Once satisfied with his efforts, he turned the corner and headed to the alley on the other side of the street.

Waiting for him, shrouded in darkness was an old, homeless man with a tin can in hand. He had long, shaggy matted white hair, thick, bushy eyebrows and deep wrinkles on his face. The old man's eyes widened exponentially when he approached him. He raised the can as if read to attack against the hooded man.

Stopping a few feet away from the man, he removed his wand and twirled it in a circle, then jabbed through the circle and said, "Agent Gold reporting for duty."

Almost as if it were instantaneous, the old man's black straightened, his eyes became alert and aware and his scared expression melted away into one of command.

"Right on time Agent Gold," the old man said in a cultured Oxford voice.

He extricated a wand from his dirty, ragged clothes and waved it over himself. At once, the illusion over his form wavered and fell, revealing a similarly garbed, black-robed wizard. His face too was distorted by the same charms.

"An impressive illusion Agent White." Agent Gold commented lightly and received a nod in response.

Agent White held up the tin can and offered it to him; Gold complied and placed his left hand lightly on it. He then raised his wand and muttered, "Mission Commencement."

Gold felt a hard tug on his navel and was pulled backwards from the very plane of existence. The world swirled in many colours, shapes and sounds and he held onto the portkey tightly, yet never betraying his discomfort.

Just as suddenly as it began, he felt himself descending from the air. Bending his knees forward and coordinating himself, he began

running in midair and the magic slowed his descent until he landed lightly on his feet.

The new location could be summed up in one word: barren. There were just rocks and boulders on the tiny island and endless water in all directions. A large stone fortress stood in the centre of the island, encased within the deadliest of jagged rocks. The tower appeared to be in a precarious position, somewhat tilted, yet undeniably sturdy. An air of hopelessness and despair was perpetually abounded in the atmosphere. The worst prison in existence stood before them.

They called it Azkaban.

Clamping down on his need to shiver, Gold applied a warming charm on himself knowing it was in vain. Without further comment, Agent White walked towards the Prison entrance and Gold followed in his footsteps.

At the front desk, there was a night-duty Auror, barely staying awake. White calmly twitched his shoulder in Gold's direction and gave him the signal. Gold swooped in and applied a light sleeping charm before the Auror had any idea that something was happening.

Having subdued the meagre first defence of the scariest prison in the world, the two Mystery Agents delved deeper into the caverns.

"Agent Gold," White whispered into the darkness as the cold began to become unbearable, "The dementors sense our presence, have your patronus at the ready."

Gold responded in the affirmative in a calm voice, trying and succeeding in getting a hold of the upheaval of his mind and emotions.

A dark robe-like figure appeared in front of them, its skeletal hands opened in anticipation and cold breath on its hole-like mouth. He screwed his eyes shut and remembered fondly the time when he was a little boy and his mother held him in her arms and told him that he would one day be a great wizard, one that would make a difference.

"Expecto Patronum!" Agent Gold said forcefully and a shimmering white poodle erupted from his wand.

He blushed lightly because his patronus was a constant source of humour among his colleagues, but suppressed the instinct. He was on a mission!

A silver hyena soon joined his poodle and the two animals drove the dementor back with ease.

It was a testament to Agent White's professionalism that he didn't even crack a single jibe at Gold's patronus.

Approaching the first cell, Agent White entered and removed a vial from his belt while Gold maintained guard at the door, his poodle still a shimmering white.

He had no idea what the potion was that White was feeding the prisoner and if he was being honest with himself, he'd rather not know. Plausible deniability.

They passed through many cells in the lower levels of Azkaban, Gold recognised some of the prisoners with ease, and while others he did not.

A single theme ran among the prisoners that Gold knew was the connecting factor: they were all convicted Death Eaters.

The two wizards made their way through the bowels of Azkaban, ascending higher and higher until they reached the upper echelons of the Prison. The cells that housed the most vicious and diabolical of Death Eaters were right in front of them.

The first door had a name etched on the surface; in the dim light it was barely readable. The dementors were keeping a close eye on them, but they didn't dare to intervene with the patroni burning brightly in defence.

When White's hyena approached, the light from its silvery form lit up the nameplate.

Bellatrix Lestrange.

Agent White opened the complex locking charm on the door as Gold once again kept the dementors at bay. The door creaked open and he heard White enter, wand aloft.

"Who is it?" it was a hiss from the occupant of the cell.

"Your worst nightmare Lestrage." White responded evilly.

"What do you want?" she said bunching up...something...covers maybe?

"Open wide."

There were the unmistakable sounds of a struggle, but given that White was a fully functional and healthy Mystery Agent and she was an intensely emaciated and demented witch, the fight was short-lived.

He heard the gulping sounds as the potion was forced down her throat. Then something different happened, more potions were forced into her and she ingested them with surprising reluctance.

"Master will get you back for this," she threatened as he moved away from her, "he will reward me, his most loyal follower and let me carve your head and decorate it with my piss for the world to see."

There was a brief silence and Gold almost gulped thinking that Agent White was probably carving her up and preparing to piss on her just to show her who was boss. Then he heard the unmistakeable sound of a spell being fired and Bellatrix screamed.

"AAAAAA!"

"Not if I get him first bitch!"

The screaming ended abruptly and then, "Obliviate!"

White emerged from the room, his robes a little haphazard but none worse for wear.

"Keep the patroni running and tell me if you are tiring. We have a few more cells to visit." He said in a deadly calm voice.

It took them a further ten minutes, but they visited every single cell in the highest guarded level of the prison and administered the potions and memory charms on the captive Death Eaters. When the task was complete, they slowly walked out of Azkaban, the dementors keeping a strict watch on them, following them and waiting for their guard to drop.

It didn't.

Once sufficiently distanced from the prison entrance, White held up the tin can again and Gold held onto it tightly.

"Mission Accomplished."

A tug behind his navel and the dreary world of Azkaban disappeared from his view. They landed in the same London alley they departed from. Agent White took back the tin can and reapplied his illusion of the old man.

As he limped away, his sack on his back he turned around and winked at Agent Gold who was still recovering from the abrupt shift in temperature and environment.

With one last breath, Agent Gold twirled his robes and disappeared with a loud crack.

He reappeared in front of an old, abandoned muggle building that had an 'out of order' sign on it. Transfiguring his robes back into their original composition, he glamourised his face and adopted one of an old man with large brown eyes and a bulging gut.

Gold tapped on the sign and took the employee entrance in.

"Welcome to St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies." The disembodied voice said through the intercom.

Gold approached the front desk and nodded once to the receptionist who barely noticed him, as her eyes were half-shut.

Taking a carefree stroll, he headed in the direction of the Spell Damage Ward while whistling until he approached the often-overlooked entrance of Long-Term Care Ward.

He pulled aside the door and then quickly pushed it back in place.

There, sitting on a crisp white bed was a figure with long, blond locks and a vapid expression on his face, the figure didn't even acknowledge when he came towards him.

"I'm sorry for doing this to you every time Mr. Longbottom," he said to the man with the golden hair and pearly white teeth, he hefted him up and took him back to his bed.

He removed the covers and vanished the pillows that had been placed there to make the appearance of a sleeping form. He settled the man in his rightful bed and with a quick wave said, "Finite Incantatem."

The illusion of blond hair and youthfulness disappeared and a scraggy-looking man in his forties with dirty brown hair and empty hazel eyes looked at him before turning away and going to sleep.

"If you were in your senses, I'm quite sure you would have understood Mr. Longbottom, perhaps even approved." Agent Gold said sadly as he dispelled the glamour on his person and sat down on his rightful bed, previously occupied by Frank Longbottom.

He pulled back his long blond locks and tied them up in a ponytail; he looked into his bedside mirror and smiled a flashy smile.

"That's the smile to die for," he said to no one in particular as he observed his reflection.

After all, he was the five time winner of Witch Weekly's Cutest Smile Award.

Gilderoy Lockhart smiled wider before kissing his reflection and then going to sleep for the night: it had been a long one.

Surprise Surprise!

With a heavy sigh, she sat back in her high-backed chair and looked to her ceiling with half-lidded eyes. It was dark, only the flickering candle provided any source of light or warmth. It was exactly how she liked it.

She had worked a long time to be where she was, a long, long time.

"That girl, she is insufferable! Probably going to destroy the world as we know it to fit her skewed perspective I daresay..." Headmaster Dippet said adamantly.

"Think before acting young lady, I would hate to see a prodigy such as yourself waste away..." Professor Slughorn said with a half-smile.

"Always on your high horse, be wary, the fall could be quite great if you don't take stock of your surroundings..." Professor Dumbledore cautioned with a twinkle.

She had once been the golden girl of Hogwarts, the prospective academic with a flair for magic seen ever so rarely. There was so much to be seen in her, such much to be appreciated.

But she had been letdown by her world, disappointed by her government and disgruntled by her powerlessness. In that moment, when she knew that her views, her brilliance and her grand plans would never be appreciated, she had resolved to be the best she could and then some.

Too bad no one would ever know how hard she had to work to get to where she was, not even the people she surrounded herself with daily would ever know the truth.

There was a brisk knock on her office door and her eyes snapped in its direction with unusual ferocity. It was rare that anyone ever came to visit her in her office. She could count on one hand with fingers to spare the number of times she had been approached without her knowledge or prior approval.

This had better be good.

Sitting up in her chair, she simply extracted his wand and without even moving, summoned the nearby glowing white ball silently.

In the foam and mist that covered the interior, she got a vague outline of her interrupter.

It was Department Policy: when an agent was assigned a room, only four other agents (including the assignee) knew of the room's existence and location. She was currently in the office of her predecessor who had quite happily handed her the mantle she currently held. It had been a legendary decision because of the three agents considered for the role of leader of the Department of Mysteries; she was the youngest and by far the most inexperienced.

Nevertheless, as she sat back in her chair with her chest puffed out and her back ramrod straight, she swayed her wand and allowed her door to open with a quick swish. She had assumed her alternate personality.

Another agent in nondescript black robes, charmed to hide his (or her) appearance, shape, form and spelled to distort his (or her) face came through at a relaxed pace. The agent walked towards her desk and bowed with a courteous nod.

She nodded back in acknowledgement, "I must confess I am at a loss to predict the reason for your presence Agent White." She said genially, although the underlying threat was still obvious.

He was stiff in his posture, if he was nervous there was no hint of it, "My apologies for the unannounced visit Leader, but an important matter has come up."

She sat back, relaxing slightly as he continued not having moved an inch, "Reports have come through, Azkaban Prison has been raided, its prisoners freed and the dementors deflected. It is just as the spy had told us would happen."

She smiled slightly to herself and nodded, "Am I to assume that the potions supplied and used are fully functional?"

Agent White gave a stiff nod, "All the prisoners that had been found with the Dark Mark were force-fed the entirety of the potion while Agent Gold covered my back at the prison last week. They had then been obliterated of the experience altogether."

He paused to gather his thoughts and then continued, "The potions are triggered to be part of their blood stream and eventually become a fundamental part of their genetic code, embedding themselves permanently in their psyche and any future progeny that they may

sire. As per your instructions, the potion's effects have been designed for maximum long-term effect, whereby they won't feel anything for the first month while they are recovering, but the weakest will fall first and their deaths will be caused entirely naturally," he smiled cruelly, "naturally in the ranks of Death Eaters that is."

"Am I to further assume that the potions have been successfully keyed to the Dark Lord?" She said lightly.

"Undoubtedly, when their psyche and mental capacity has been sufficiently weakened, they will all make an unprovoked attack on their supposed 'master', upon reaction to which they will suffer under the pain of death at his hand for their 'betrayal'." Agent White provided.

"What of the prisoners we discussed?" She asked almost as an afterthought.

"Prisoners Lestranges, Carrow and Dolohov have been subjected to the modified imperius curse, their inner will entirely bent and a simple listener implanted in their subconscious. As soon as they are released from medical care, we will be receiving reports on Voldemort's progress at every station." Agent White finished his report.

"Excellent." She said sitting back with contentment.

There was another knock on her door and she sat up again and allowed entry to the new agent. To be approached unannounced by one agent was coincidence; by two was a plan. She held her wand subtly closer and grasped her portkey, hidden in her robes tightly.

Sweeping into the room came an agent that was intimately acquainted with the Department. In fact, she admitted bitterly to herself, she knew that if this agent hadn't been unwilling, she would never have acquired the position of Leader of the Department.

"Agent Black what an unpleasant surprise." She said sarcastically.

"Come now Leader, you could show a modicum of respect and courtesy, after all tradition begets it." The aggravating woman under the cloak said sweetly.

She smiled tightly, "What may I do for you today Agent Black?"

She placed her finger on her distorted chin in mock-contemplation, "I seem to remember vaguely a message I had to deliver, ah yes," she paused dramatically, "Rosier has entered the building and is heading towards the Minister's office in guise. Let us pray for his success."

She stood up abruptly, alarm clear in her eyes, "Rosier isn't supposed to make his move until next week! The Auror Department hasn't been dispatched a warning yet about a possible attack on the Minister. Fudge will be dead within seconds!"

Agent Black frivolously waved her hand, "You say that as if it's a bad thing. Besides you can hardly blame the spy, he knows it's a suicide mission, I say applaud him for going out on his own terms." She turned a round ready to leave.

"How did you know of his arrival into the Ministry Agent Black?" Agent White asked her retreating back, "If his disguise is set by Department standards, even we shouldn't be able to recognize him or his magical signature."

She turned around and faced Agent White with what the Leader assumed to be mirthful eyes, "Come now Agent White, we all have our secrets, a witch never reveals her craft."

As she sashayed out of the room she called back, "I'm taking another holiday, and I will be back whenever I feel like it."

"Agent Black!" That stopped her in her tracks, "Your insubordination is unacceptable, and besides you have just returned from a vacation this past week; I can hardly sanction another. There is work to be done."

Without turning around Agent Black answered, "I know what work needs to be done Leader, better and more fully than you can possibly imagine, it is exactly why I must leave."

"What work is so important then?" She spat out angrily.

"Remember this Leader," Agent Black said in a tight voice that betrayed her ire despite being relatively pleasant, "This Department needs me much more than I need it, with a war looming in the distance, it needs me more than ever. I have devoted my life to this Department and lost more than you, a mere child, could ever imagine."

Agent Black left and the door slammed behind her ominously.

"Well I think that went relatively well as compared to last time." Agent White said cheerily after a few tense seconds.

BOOM! The very foundations of the Ministry shook.

"Merlin's beard!" She said loudly, "Rosier's struck, glamour up immediately, we have to visit the Minister's office."

Quick as lightning, the Leader and Agent White glamoured their appearances and robes. In quick succession, they raced out of the Department of Mysteries and used one of the Ministry's specially designed lifts to reach the Minister's Administrative Floor.

It was a mess.

Debris and dust lay in all directions, there was singed parchment, burnt quills and shattered belongings for as far as the eye could see. There were a few bodies of employees who worked directly for the Minister lying about; some of them were bleeding profusely. A few rapid field medic charms and all the workers were found to be alive, if wounded and looking forward to a long recovery.

The two Mystery operatives made their way through the shambles of what was left of the Minister's staff until they reached the end of the floor. In the dispersing dust, they managed to make out the faded outline of the doorframe of the Minister's office.

Inside they found the desecrated body of the ditzy blonde twenty-something Secretary that worked for the Minister. Beyond the main door that led to the interior of the office, they found the worst sight yet.

Instantly casting a bubblehead charm to keep out the smell, they found two bodies lying in the wake of the destruction: a burnt husk

on the ground and the shivering form of Cornelius Fudge backed up against the wall, a gash on his head and his robes layered with blood, holding up a wand that pointed to his dead ambusher.

The two agents were flabbergasted at the Minister's position, if anything; they anticipated his death with no security.

"Took you long enough you bleeding fools!" He said angrily, "I took care of the ruffian, bugger thought he could get a one-up on me."

The Leader walked forward and began healing the Minister's wounds, which even more shockingly, were only surface wounds at best.

"I must say Minister that your survival is most surprising," the Leader admitted with great newfound respect.

"I am a politician, I have to learn to survive for myself, or else I die." He said as she cleaned up his blood and checked for any internal damage.

In short order Aurors spanned the office and took the body away for inspection and other purposes. Shockingly enough, the Minister wasn't soaking up the attention being hurled in his direction, he was mostly indifferent to it all, and he just appeared tired.

"Amelia," He called his Head of Magical Law Enforcement, "I will give my statement tomorrow, I am heading home for the night, we can wrap it all up in the morning, if that's alright?"

Of course it wasn't alright, but when you're the Minister of Magic, you can get all sorts of exceptions.

Seeing the matter being handled by the Aurors, the Leader took a few tentative steps back and exited, she had other matters to attend to.

Giving some surreptitious orders to Agent White, she headed towards the Ministry Apparition Point and apparated home.

Nearly three hours later she was sitting back behind her real desk, the one she considered her real desk anyway, she was finally where she belonged more than anywhere else.

Her pocket mirror was vibrating, indicating that someone wished to contact her from the Department. Taking a moment to recast her distortion charms, she picked up the mirror and looked in, the blurry face of Agent White appeared.

"Leader there is some unexpected news," he started uncertainly, "The Minister disappeared after being returned to his home, nobody knows where he is."

She sat up straight, "I thought we had his home swept by Aurors before we let him back in?"

He nodded, "We did, but there is something else. The burnt body has been recognised."

"Rosier yes?" She said matter-of-factly.

"I'm afraid it turned up as the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge."

For a moment she just stopped and stared.

"But that means...." She started hesitantly.

"Rosier killed the Minister, polyjuiced himself, then burnt his body, planned his escape and disappeared." Agent White said succinctly.

Despite the gravity of the situation, the Leader grinned, "We underestimated him White."

He agreed sagely, "He looked through our loopholes but played along until he could get out safely. He then fooled us all."

"His wife and daughter?"

"They disappeared from the safe house we put them in last week, we have no idea where he or his family are. Do you want us to look?" He asked eagerly.

She thought about it momentarily and then shook her head in the negative, "He's been very Slytherin, but he has more than earned his reprieve. Also the binding magical contract won't allow us to

search for him. There is nothing further we can do, he planned the perfect escape."

"If that is all..." The Leader said lightly and turned away from her mirror, undoing her glammers and setting herself back in her comfortable chair.

The Minister of Magic was dead, assassinated in his own office, his assassin escaped each and every Ministry employee and Auror and two Mystery representatives from under their noses. On the same day there was a mass breakout from Azkaban prison. The Boy-Who-Lived had disappeared and showed no signs of returning. Clasp her head in her hands, the Leader was welcoming an outstanding headache. There would be uproar!

A gentle knocking informed her that someone was requiring entrance.

"Come in."

Complete with sky blue robes with pink falling stars, Albus Dumbledore entered her office, "Ah I see you've returned. How was your trip?"

She smiled sweetly, "It was truly engaging Albus, and just the relaxation I needed before starting the new term."

The old man nodded and made small talk for a few minutes before begging to take his leave. As he was at the door, about to close it, he welcomed her back one last time, "It is good to have you back Pomona; the badgers have missed you sorely."

She laughed raucously, "It is good to be back Albus."

The door closed and Pomona Sprout sighed heavily, she was growing tired of her dual life, but sacrifices had to be made. She had children to save from Umbridge and a Department of Mysteries to run. Now if only she could understand what Agent Black was alluding to...

She waved her wand and her personal parchment paper came to her, it detailed the master plan of the Department of Mysteries for the upcoming years as they dealt with Voldemort.

With a quick line from her wand, 'kill Cornelius' was slashed off the list. It happened before schedule, but sooner rather than later was her motto for a reason.

She circled her wand around the newest and boldest objective added to her list, which had just been moved up a number of spaces on the schedule of events:

Find Harry Potter.

The other lost Cassandra

It was a bright day in Munich as Cassandra formerly Trelawney sat in a little café pretending to be sipping a fizzy cola drink in muggle Munich. She was there on a mission to find her missing granddaughter.

Having learnt of her possible existence from her adoptive great-granddaughter Sybil, she had done what best she could do for her. Sybil had left a note for the Headmaster, thanking him for his kindness but making it clear that she knew where she was not needed and had decided to pursue other options outside of the country. She had taken her to Greece, Delphi to be specific and left her in the care of Apollo's Temple of Oracles. Sybil would finally receive the training and instruction she deserved to be an Oracle.

The difference between Oracles and Seers had come to light only the last few decades. If it had been a well-known fact before, perhaps the Trelawneys would have never run after Cassandra's Seer genes to begin with. But that was all wishful thinking.

She sighed as she remembered the first time she learnt of the difference from her friend Sana, the then Oracle of Delphi.

An Oracle saw the future as it was set in stone. She saw what would happen and could not be changed, no matter how much anyone tried to circumvent his or her fate. The Oracles incanted the future in prophecies, sometimes prophecies were clear and precise instructions, other times they were riddles that only made sense in hindsight. But however they were said, what was mentioned would inevitably happen.

Seers on the other hand saw trends of the future; how the future may have been affected by the differing decisions that one might have made. At one point an individual may have said yes and other times he may have said no, that changed small events in his life. But in the grand scheme of things, great incidents like the fall of a royal family or great wars, they were expressed in prophecies because they had been preordained to occur by a higher power and could not be avoided.

However before she left her, Sybil had regaled her with all she knew about the enigmatic Cassandra Agnes Trelawney.

In 1902, Nicholas Trelawney II married Ophelia Ollivander; they lived a quiet and happy life in the outskirts of Chester. In 1905, Ophelia gave birth to a healthy baby boy Nicholas III. Ten years later she received a startling but nevertheless pleasant surprise with her pregnancy, her husband and ten-year-old son were equally surprised, but looked forward to the new addition to their small family. In 1915, the elderly couple of Nicholas II and his wife Ophelia welcomed their daughter Cassandra Trelawney, named after Nicholas' deceased mother. They affectionately called her Cassie.

Cassie was considered a vivacious and brilliant witch, she was a prodigy to enter Hogwarts from the first day, and the library was her home away from home. She was sorted into Gryffindor like her father, much to the surprise of her family who considered her a Slytherin through and through. Her years through Hogwarts were marked with outstanding abilities in all fields to one degree or another. The then new Transfiguration Professor, Albus Dumbledore had even offered her a place as his apprentice, an offer he has never repeated to another student since. She declined. In 1932, Cassie graduated from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry as Head Girl and the new record-holder for highest NEWT scores attained in Charms and Potions (Incidentally, Tom Riddle would beat her score in Potions by a single mark a little over a decade later).

Cassie believed her calling was to her government and the improvement of wizarding society. She was a pureblood, coming from a long line of Seers on her father's side and wand-makers from her mother's. She was prized even though her family was merely modest in its financial capacity. Orion Black asked for her hand in marriage for his oldest son Arcturas.

Nicholas II was delighted; he knew that the Blacks while a Dark family were very rich. In their home, his little Cassie and all her future children would be well taken care of.

She refused mind, body and soul to the union. It was quite the scandal at the time, for a young witch to refuse to marry into a family that was far above her station.

In her own words as reported by the Daily Prophet, "Arcturas is a vile human being and I hope he burns in Perdition for all of eternity!"

It was a long courtship, a conflicting courtship, but Arcturas was the oldest Black of the oldest Black alive: he was cunning, ambitious and trained since a young age to pursue what he wanted relentlessly until it was his. Cassie was his new target.

For two years he didn't give up, turning up at her doorstep with flowers in hand and sweet words of flattery on his lips. Throughout it all, she never budged from her decision. They were the sweethearts of the upper echelons of wizarding society for the time.

When all hope seemed to be lost, out of nowhere, she acceded to Arcturas' persistent pursuit. On 14th September 1938, Cassandra Agnes Trelawney became Cassandra Trelawney Black; anybody who was somebody was at the event. In the gathering gloom that was hovering over the wizarding world with Grindelwald's rise, their union was like a fantasy turned into reality.

Yet what surprised all the avid followers of this star-crossed lovers' romance was that she had one stipulation in her marriage contract: she was to be allowed to work wherever and whenever she wanted. Orion Black refused, despite women being a meaningful part of wizarding society and holding positions of great purport in the wizarding world, Orion staunchly believed that a woman's first duty was to her family. But he ultimately accepted for the sake of his obsessed son.

Arcturas was sure that he could exert his influence and make sure that his wife never gained employment in the Ministry of Magic; he knew that was where she wanted to work more than anywhere else.

What he didn't realize is that his wife would gain employment in the one Department that not even the Minister of Magic had much control over. His wife was the only publicised member of the elusive Department of Mysteries. He was livid, but he had to let her work, he had promised.

In 1939 war broke out on the continent, Grindelwald was on the rise.

Cassie would disappear for days on end, Arcturas would be furious with her unannounced departures. He considered himself a liberal man in that time period, though initially reluctant, he embraced his wife's employment and treated her with great pride for being accepted by such an exclusive body of the government. Nevertheless he believed (and rightly so) that he deserved to at least know if she would be coming home at night and where she would be if not. He was her husband after all!

In 1942, tempers were flaring, he stormed into the Ministry when his wife had not come home for an entire week without so much as an owl. He had reached his wit's end with her. The member of the Department that had been called to address the raging man had coolly informed the oldest Black son and new Head of Family (his father had recently passed away) that his wife had taken a sabbatical and was no longer working for the Department since a week.

His wife had disappeared.

Arcturas was in denial for months, he refused to believe his wife would do this to him. He had pursued her unremittingly, but he had never forced her hand, he had always been a gentleman, earnestly trying to win her love. Even though he would never admit it to anyone, he had been smitten by the angry, young witch since the first time he laid eyes on her. He had fallen in love with her through the course of their courtship.

One week turned into several and soon months passed by without a word from her. He was past denial and was now righteously angry, he was furious!

The Daily Prophet cast aspersions on her faithfulness and bemoaned the cruel hand of fate dealt to the man who had been the most eligible wizard just a few years ago. Cassandra Trelawney

Black became a taboo, she was the one mothers encouraged their daughters to observe and never emulate.

Arcturas fell into depression, he was miserable, he was desolate and he was alone. He had expended every resource to find her, he had seamlessly spent his money to scour the war-torn continent, the New World and the Orient in search of her: nothing turned up. He missed the woman he loved and he found solace in the arms of cheap whores that circled Knockturn Alley in the wee hours of the morning. By 1943, Arcturas was a regular patron and subscriber for Ogden's finest at most pubs in Wizing London.

When all hope seemed to be lost, in 1943, Cassandra Trelawney returned after nearly a year and half of disappearance.

She returned unannounced, the story of her disappearance had been forgotten in the wake of the real news that was shaking the Wizing World with Grindelwald's campaign. All focus was on Albus Dumbledore and the fight they knew would be inevitable between the two greatest wizards alive on the planet.

Through the alcohol induced haze of madness and burgeoning depression, Arcturas found new hope when his long, lost wife turned up on his, nay, their doorstep and asked to be let in. The dishevelled man forgot his anger, his pain, his hurt, his sorrow, all he saw was the woman he loved more than life itself and he welcomed her with open arms.

His elation was short-lived.

On 14th September 1943, exactly five years after the greatest wedding of recent times, Cassandra Agnes Trelawney created history by being the first pureblood in the past fifty years and the fifth since the creation of the Magical Institution of Marriage, to divorce her husband.

Arcturas was crushed, but he soldiered on. On 21st September 1943, Arcturas was married to Myra Tiller, a woman much older than him.

His marriage produced no heirs.

In 1945, he became the first wizard to ever be diagnosed with Inermia, the wizard-sterility disease.

Arcturas Black was childless, desolate and in a loveless marriage.

On September 14th 1948, exactly ten years from the day he considered the greatest day of his life, he was found in his study lying on his back on the ground. A picture of himself and his first wife in elaborate wedding robes clasped tightly in his left hand, a large ceremonial knife plunged into his chest, in the general area of his heart, his right hand lying limply on the hilt.

The day after his body was found, recently widowed Myra Tiller Black left England, she was said to have remarried in France a scant week later. The man she married was Arcturas' apprentice who had lived in their home with the childless couple for many years as he learnt from Arcturas the ancient art of Potions. Speculations were always made regarding Myra's possible orchestration of her husband's supposed suicide, but there was never a formal inquiry, only vague aspersions, but no definite proof.

Few people knew that Arcturas was left-handed not right.

Ever since her divorce, no one heard of Cassie Black ever again.

That is where Cassandra's research had started.

Startling her out of her musings, a young man came and stood beside her with a large smile on his face. He had a classic Aryan look: blonde hair, dark blue eyes and a handsome face.

"Oh I'm sorry," he said in flawless German, "I thought you were someone else."

She shrugged nonchalantly and turned away, the young mortal, though desirable was the least of her concerns right now.

"You look surprisingly like my friend Julia, you know, the supermodel."

She turned towards him with a raised eyebrow. He was giving her a winning smile, pearly white teeth glinting in the sunlight through the

glass panes of the window. She looked at his face closely and knew she had seen it before, in the morning, on the hoarding of an underwear advertisement outside the hotel she was staying at.

Wait a second, was that supposed to be a pick-up line? It's a good thing he was so good-looking.

She smiled slyly, she was an ethereal beauty, and she knew that, after all she was a vampire. Eternal beauty in exchange for her soul, not exactly a fair deal but you get what you get.

She was feeling a bit angst-filled that day as it was. Also since all the sex she had indulged in had been with Harry and that was more than a few months ago, she was more than a little lustful. Harry was a good boy, bless his soul, but he was still a boy, an inexperienced boy at that. He had not done much in the way of satisfying her during their two lacking encounters, although she did concede he had been enthusiastic.

She could use a man for a night.

She picked up her napkin and wrote her hotel's address on it, she then handed it to the blond model and smiled saucily.

"Meet me tonight in the Hyatt at nine, don't be late."

She got up and walked out; delighted in the way she swayed her hips and knew that every male eye was trained behind her.

Following the path down the busy streets of muggle Munich, Cassandra reached her destination; it was a small alleyway in the middle of the residential areas, relatively isolated. She approached the wall carefully and tapped the appropriate bricks. The wall gave way and Cassandra slipped through to the magical side.

The vampires had their own sources in all world conflicts, especially ones as big as the world wars. Although, as a vampire, she had never been involved in the fray of the human and magical fights, she was well-aware of the coming's and going's of spies and the like. Cassie Trelawney worked for the Department of Mysteries; her husband was always displeased by her continued, unexplained absences for work. It was not much of a stretch of the imagination that Cassie Trelawney was a spy.

During the Second World War, spies worked in networks, British spies from the Ministry of Magic were always in the most obvious of places: primarily pubs where the low-lying thugs and foot-soldiers went for a drink after a long day of Jew-hunting and in search for a quick romp in the sheets. It was easiest to learn secrets when alcohol and potions loosened tongues.

Once in Magical Munich, she followed along an old cobbled pathway until she reached her meeting point: Schmidts. This was the second-to-last pub left in Magical Munich that had been around during the war; she had already frequented all the pubs in Berlin and Bonn and turned up empty. She was becoming desperate at that point.

Walking into the open establishment, she sidled up to the bartender, a young-looking lad with a boyish smile that widened when he saw her.

"Can I get you something miss?" He asked in German.

"Yes, I'm actually looking for someone, you wouldn't happen to know where he is? Philip Schmidt."

The boy's eyes narrowed momentarily and he shrugged, "He's at the back, in the office. Doesn't come out much these days, but you can try your luck."

"Thank you." She said politely and followed his directions to the office.

It was an old, drab brown door that the vampire knocked on.

There was a little coughing on the other side when she heard a low, "enter".

She creaked the door open and walked through.

An old man with a balding head of grey hair sat behind a desk. His gut was jutting out and there was a hint of drool on his lips, dripping onto his messy desk that was covered in an assortment of papers and some knick-knacks.

The man looked at her with narrowed eyes, just like the young bartender did, all of a sudden, his eyes snapped open and his mouth was gaping.

"Amara?" He said hesitantly.

She was shocked but hid it well.

"I'm afraid I'm not Amara." She said delicately, her hand on her wand ready to strike.

The bulbous man shook his head violently and ran towards her from his place at a speed surprising for a man his age. His gut vibrated in the process.

He had a photo-frame in his hand.

He thrust the photo under her nose and shook it frantically.

Cassandra peered at it carefully: it was a clearly wizarding photograph, there was a tall man with a broad chest near the bar she had just seen, several men were around and it seemed busy. The tall man had short-cropped blond hair and a sweet smile; he was roguishly handsome on all accounts. He was sitting on the counter of the bar, his hand around the waist of a woman sitting on his lap. The woman was laughing and hiding her face in the man's muscled chest, her hands wound around his torso. She had long black hair. For a split second, the woman turned her face and looked out and she saw two brilliant amber eyes on a pale face. Two eyes that she saw everyday in the mirror.

The old man watched her reaction carefully, "I knew it was you Amara, my sweet Amara, I knew you would come back to me someday. You haven't changed a bit, not one tiny bit since I last saw you."

He was clearly not entirely in his senses and he was gently trailing his hand on her cheek.

He shivered on touching her skin.

"You're so cold Amara, come here," he said opening his hands and drawing her in to a hug that she complied to with little reluctance, "You never need to leave again, we can be together forever now."

He was stroking her hair when she moved away and sat down on one of his chairs, he immediately sat down beside her on another chair, her hand in his own and he was caressing her hand.

"Tell me why I left...err...Philip, I want to know that you remember." The man was clearly not all 'there', might as well take a little advantage.

"I remember it so clearly, it was the greatest day, Grindelwald had fallen and the magical people were free again. You had been living with me for the past six months, at the time. They were six of the most glorious months of my life sweet Amara. We made love all the time; I could never have enough of you and you me. I had asked for your hand in marriage that day and you had said yes, we were to be married in a week."

He was smiling widely throughout his explanation, and then his expression saddened.

"Then you had been called back, you had to return to Berlin to be with your mother. I wanted to come with you, but you wouldn't hear any of it. You left and promised to come back as soon as possible."

Silent tears were streaming down his cheeks, "You never came back Amara, and you never sent an owl, you never explained. I...I searched for you, for a long time, I feared the worst. Nearly five years later my father forced me to marry, you have to understand!" He was now desperate, his eyes wild, "I had no choice, I had to marry her, father wouldn't hear otherwise. He would kick me out and then I would have had nowhere to go."

He sniffed, "I'm sorry I betrayed you my love, but...but you came back, you came home to me like you promised and you're just as beautiful as you were fifty years ago. We can finally go to Nice together. Remember all those plans, all those dreams of opening a restaurant there, you would be the hostess and I would be the cook. We would have the perfect home, a family."

Schmidt seemed to be tiring from the excitement and she coaxed him to the small bed in the adjoining room, she helped him into it and covered him. She could hear him mutter in his sleep, he kept saying 'Amara'.

She backed away and left the office, she went to the bartender who was looking at her suspiciously.

"Is he alright?" The bartender asked.

"He thought I was someone named Amara and then he got tired so I put him in bed." She explained airily.

The bartender hung his head, "You will have to excuse my grandfather, he fell in love with a witch many years ago, nearly spent the entire fortune trying to find her when she left him without so much as a goodbye. But he never gave up. My grandmother always hated him for that."

She just nodded, "Of course, I understand, it's a pity really."

She made small talk for a little more time and then took her leave, declining the offer for a drink in the evening.

She knew she had a plan now, she had found what she needed to, she knew where Cassie's posting had been, right here in Munich. She had a rendezvous with a pub owner and secured her stay and background. She had done what any operative was expected to do when on a mission undercover for the Department of Mysteries. Cassandra now even had an inkling of where to search next: Cassie had apparently loved Nice; she hoped to live there one day. Well, Nice would be her next destination. Time and money were no barriers, she would search and search, but an answer she would find.

For the first time in over a hundred years, Cassandra trembled in fear and disgust. She withdrew the copied photo that she had spelled from Schmidt's old photo frame. The girl in the picture was unmistakable. She looked at Cassie and smiled widely, then waved a little before quickly turning around and hiding in the man's robes while he laughed, his hand caressing her hair.

Who are you Cassie?

The Nuances of Wizardry

Harry had been practising spells for nearly three hours now. Before that the Amanta had him working on Transfiguration and Enchantment combination magic. Even before that he had been preparing three potions simultaneously for Stefan while figuring out ways to improve them.

The end result being: he had found a more potent form of the blood replenishing potion, a better tasting if mildly less effective stomach cleanser and a destroyed cauldron at Stefan's. He had managed to mimic one of the spells he had seen the Amanta do the first time he met her in a fashion. With great effort, he had learnt how to transfigure any form of collected debris or rubble into a long chain, the closer the debris was to being in its most natural state, the easier the transfiguration. Wood from the garden was ideal, metal of any kind, especially refined metal, was the hardest. Once he had transfigured the long lines of chains, he learnt how to enchant them to be animate and attack his opponents with unyielding ferocity. The Amanta was suitably impressed and they were working on his endurance so he could not only maintain the chain for longer periods of time, but also maybe even be able to make more of them at the same time.

After doing all of that: he was knackered.

With a great huff, he sat down on the ground and took a few deep breaths. By all accounts, he was one of the more powerful students in his yea at Hogwarts, if not the most powerful, but so much strenuous exercise would be too much for anyone.

"Just a moment Amanta," he said through heavy inhalations, "I'll get back up...in...a...moment."

The Amanta shook her head in wonder, "Harry, any fully trained and matured witch or wizard would not have been able to endure that much training as long as you did without falling over, you've maintained yourself with dignity. I think it's enough to call it a day."

He nodded absently; he began getting up, but then fell back down on the ground.

"Oh dear, I think it took more out of you than I first realized," She observed, "I'd give you some pepper-up but you already had some yesterday and I don't want you to become too dependent on them or their potency will decrease in your system."

He just nodded along, agreeing with her reasoning.

She waved her wand and a glass of pumpkin juice appeared in front of him.

"Drink to your heart's content Harry, its charmed to keep refilling until you're sated. I don't want you to spoil your appetite so drink up." She said commandingly.

With nary an objection, he lifted the glass and drank it in one big gulp.

A little while past and he lay there, he was breathing deeply, trying to recover his strength. Soon enough the Amanta returned and sat down on her couch, conjuring a tea set and pouring herself a steaming cuppa.

"Would you like to take a seat?" She offered lightly.

He heaved a sigh and picked himself up with some effort, then sat down quickly on her beige sofa.

He waved his wand and silently poured himself a cup of tea.

"Is something on your mind Harry?" She asked when he hadn't spoken up.

He shook his head distractedly, "No, not really, why do you ask?"

The Amanta put her cup down and regarded him keenly, "it has been some time since you returned and you have been very distracted yet focussed as well. You work with single-minded determination at your studies but have acquired a sense of detachedness. The madness and fire within you has somewhat been eclipsed by this newfound sense of obligation to continue studying here. Something is bothering you and as your Mistress it is my duty to help you learn how to steer through the haze of

adulthood not only in my magical fields but also in an emotional sense."

He sighed as he sipped his tea thoughtfully, "Amanta, do you remember when we briefly discussed supposed pureblood supremacy and a certain deficiency of the muggle-borns?"

She nodded in response and he continued, "Well, during my brief visit in England certain...situations...arose where the agenda of 'blood' and 'family magic' came up, I was hoping you could enlighten me as to what exactly is so important about 'purebloodedness'."

She sat back and considered his question for a few moments before responding, "That is a very deep question you are asking, something that is hotly contested in the wizarding world in recent times. In order to answer your question, I must ask you what you know of the history of magic as we know and have recorded it?"

He thought back to all the history of magic lectures he had attended and all he could remember were vague mentions of some things regarding the arguments for and against the Statute of Secrecy being erected, but mostly goblin wars.

"Haven't the foggiest I'm afraid." He responded honestly.

"As I expected," The Amanta nodded, "What you must understand Harry is that 'purebloods' are right in claiming that their ancestry and environment grants them a certain advantage over muggle-borns, that had been the norm for sometime now."

"But why Amanta? I...learnt...things about 'family magic' and things of that ilk, but I don't understand its significance. What difference does it make if you have a long history of family magic or not?" Harry argued, "I know many muggle-born witches and wizards that have not a gram of magic in their families, their parents are as muggle as they come, but they are very powerful nonetheless and the exact opposite for certain purebloods."

Hermione and Neville came to mind.

She raised her hand and stopped his tirade, "You are misconstruing my statement not unlike many purebloods have done in the past. The advantage that purebloods have through 'family magic' is gifts

of magic." Seeing his nonplussed expression the Amanta backtracked, "To give an analogy, we find individuals with bright blue eyes to be just a tad more eye-catching and attractive than say someone with drab, almost coal-black eyes. The person with blue eyes has it in their family, they've inherited it from somewhere in their lineage as has the person with plain black eyes. Magical gifts are exactly the same."

"What do you mean by magical gifts?" He asked.

She shrugged, "Any advantage magically Harry that is not common. The ability to be an animagus is not common. It is hereditary. If you are from a pureblood family, even if your parents aren't animagi, somewhere in your lineage, some great-aunt or uncle may have been and granted you that ability to explore and utilize. The same is not true for a muggle-born. They cannot inherit abilities like animagus because their birth is a quirk of fate in a muggle family. They do not have the ability. The same goes for other gifts like Seers who can See the future, Empathisers who can feel and manipulate others' emotions to a degree, Trend-Viewers, those who can see the trends of magic and are often dubbed as having Mage-Sight, Metamorphmagi, the ability to control and change one's appearance at will, transmutation at an instinctual level. There are many other gifts some more common like animagi and Empathisers, others outrageously obscure like Metamorphmagi, Ectomancy, Elemental Manipulation and so on and so forth."

"Each and every one of these abilities is hereditary. Wizards and witches have performed tests and experiments, concocted the wildest theories and proved some as well. But all testing and scientific research has pointed to these rare abilities being hereditary over anything else." She took a deep breath and allowed him to ask his question.

"But then where did these abilities originate?" He asked wonderingly, "They had to have started somewhere, somehow not making them hereditary."

She relaxed slightly and pursed her lips, "Why does the sun rise every morning? Why is the Earth tilted on an axis? Why does the Pole Star always direct north, why not south? There is no answer to such questions Harry, but I assure you people much older and much

before our time have been asking these questions, we are no more closer now to finding the answers than we were then."

He deflated, "So is it because of these magical gifts that the pureblood agenda comes from? They think that because they have these rare abilities they deserve ultimate superiority over the muggle-borns?"

She nodded, "Partly Harry, but a large part of it is just basic human nature. We look for ways to make ourselves feel greater, grander than what we truly are and the easiest way to do that is by lowering everyone else around us. In the Purebloods' case, it was easiest to lower the muggle-borns and half-bloods deeming their magic unfit or not strong enough."

"So, are the purebloods right then? The muggle-borns are unfit and not as strong because they lack these abilities or even the possibility of inheriting them?" He asked wonderingly.

She shook her head, "That is a matter of perspective, if having these abilities is what makes a wizard or witch powerful, then, yes, the muggle-borns are inferior. But these abilities, when present are merely an advantage, nothing more. The base to perform magic that is in every witch and wizard is exactly the same. A pureblood, a half-blood and a muggle-born are equally powerful the first time they pick up a wand."

His mind was spinning as the her words registered, "But, before, you said that the muggle-borns have a distinct disadvantage as compared to the purebloods when it came to magic itself, you said this a few months back when we first discussed this topic."

She wagged her finger in a 'no' gesture and widened her eyes, "You are paraphrasing Harry, I said the muggle-raised not muggle-born tend to have a distinct disadvantage when compared to the wizard-raised not pureblood. Never once did I mention 'blood' at all in that explanation of my views."

"How do you mean?" He was perplexed.

"Magic is like a limb of your body, the more you use it, the more fit and useful it will be and the more you can harness it to grow stronger. Unlike your real body, it does not grow frail over time; it

does not weaken or weather. So long as you keep practising magic from a young age all through your life, your magic will be strong even at your deathbed. When it comes to the wizard-raised, they are introduced to the concept of magic from a young age. They understand its existence and significance from a young age and are made to use some magic from a very young age." The Amanta explained sagely.

"I thought Ministry regulations prevented that sort of thing? Or are the rules bent for purebloods?" Harry asked with a hint of bitterness.

She shook her head in the negative; "In most organized nations the Ministry frowns and controls allowing children to use magic, let alone touching a wand before they are eleven. Their magical 'limbs' are not strong enough to sustain magic as they do in schooling years and overuse of magic can even kill them. What most households do is set up child wards around the house. These are very basic wards and are considered useful for any growing magical child. What these wards do is leech a small amount of magic off of a child and use it to reinforce the structure and form of the home the child is living in. It is for this very reason that when you walk into a wizarding home, you can get a distinct impression of what kind of home it is. The home resonates the feelings that child bears for the house. Also the leeching of the magic causes the child to essentially use his or her magic to recover the magic spent, thus strengthening their magical 'limbs'."

Suddenly the feeling of happiness and family togetherness that he felt when visiting and staying at the Burrow made a lot more sense.

"So children are made to use their magic from a very young age," Harry followed along, "This makes them more powerful in a sense, because their magical 'limb' is constantly active. But if magic is being leeched off a child then why do families look for accidental magic to determine a child's magical ability? One of my friends is from a pureblood home, but he didn't perform any accidental magic until much later in life, they thought he was a squib for the longest time."

She hemmed and hawed, "Well when it comes to child wards, it's difficult to determine whether magic is being leeched off of the child or not. Although we call them child wards, they really leech any magic from anyone present in the home; this includes the child's

parents and any siblings or other family living there. So when a warder checks if the ward has been leeching magic and reinforcing the home, it just gives a rough estimate of how much magic overall has been leeched and whether the ward is still active."

He nodded understandingly, "I understand, these wards help keep magic active in children, 'exercising' their magic, so to speak and making them strong. The same isn't true for muggle-raised children."

She nodded, "Exactly Harry, they did an experiment to this effect some decades ago in China, an identified muggle-born whose parents were killed when she was one was given up to the care of a wizarding household, she grew up under child wards and the like. Another pureblood child who also lost his parents in the same year was given to his mother's distant squib relations, as they were the only family alive, that child had no child wards and no regular activity of any kind to practice his magic other than bursts of accidental magic every now and then. When they went to magical school in Beijing in the same year, the muggle-born but wizard-raised witch was far more 'powerful' than the pureblood but muggle-raised wizard."

"Child wards make that much of a difference?" He asked awed.

She tilted her head as she considered her response, "The creation of child wards is only a recent, maybe two or two-and-a-half century old innovation based on research dating back to the Middle Ages. But there are many other ways to strengthen and essentially 'exercise', as you put it, a child's magic to make them as magically healthy as possible. Child wards are simply the most effective, least time-consuming and cost-effective."

He was silent for a few moments as he digested all the information, "But Amanta, that still doesn't explain why my pureblood friend did not perform any accidental magic until much later in life than the norm and he obviously grew up under child wards. Also in school, although it is rude to say this, but he isn't exactly the strongest magically; whereas my muggle-born friend is one of the strongest witches."

She smiled sadly, "Mental blocks and determination are your answers respectively. If your pureblood friend thinks he is weak, undeserving of magic and unable to perform and control it, then that

is exactly what he is making himself become. Wizards and witches like that just need a little positive reinforcement and a little push and faith in them and they can surprise you. Furthermore, accidental magic is something witches and wizards perform in states of great emotional turmoil. When a child grows up in a stable home, where his needs are met and is relatively happy, he does not generally go through great emotional turmoil, so his magic never finds a reason to manifest itself as accidental. As for your muggle-born friend, you've mentioned that she is almost prodigious in her ability, am I right?"

He nodded.

"Would you say that she works harder than anyone else? Her practice and dedication to magic is something to admire?" She piled on.

He nodded feeling like she was describing Hermione perfectly, when his nods slowed and suddenly his eyes widened, "Personally I always thought," he said slowly, "that she is practising and working this hard to show everyone that her muggle background doesn't make her weak. Could she have compensated Amanta? By working doubly harder than everyone else, could she have strengthened her magic in the way that child wards would have strengthened her through sheer will and hard-work?"

She waved her palm in a so-so manner, "That definitely helped, but I would wager that your friend did not have a perfectly pleasant childhood, it was unpleasant enough for her to have to resort to accidental magic on a regular basis. Even then she should have been more than a little behind than the wizard-raised, but her hard work has probably bridged that gap and gone over and beyond it."

He was surprised, but then he remembered Hermione vaguely mentioning being teased mercilessly in her old school before she came to Hogwarts. If her school-life had been anything like his own, the she probably performed accidental magic all the time.

Like a bucket of cold water he realized that he too performed accidental magic all the time when living with the Dursleys.

Was I strengthened above and beyond my peers because of that?

He refocused his attention on the Amanta and asked another question, "The Ministry generally knows when accidental magic is performed, they send obliviators and magic reversal squads all the time, why don't they just set up child wards around muggle-borns', sorry, muggle-raised's homes as well? Why not introduce those families to the magical world as soon as possible?"

She looked away grimly, "That is a difficult question and is two-fold Harry. It has its roots in history and politics. Historically, it was never necessary. Muggle-raised magicals were almost always persecuted for their abilities in the muggle world. There was a genuine fear of magic by the 'God-fearing man' and no muggle-raised made it to a schooling age without having used copious amounts of accidental magic in the process. So it was never really necessary in the past, in fact, we would find that the muggle-raised witches and wizards were sometimes more powerful than the wizard-raised because of the hardships they have had to survive under."

Again he was painfully reminded of his own childhood and he really started wondering if there was an ulterior motive of him being left at the Dursleys beyond just them being his only family alive. Was it possible he was left there to make him strong to fulfil the prophecy Sirius mentioned?

Oblivious to his inner musings the Amanta continued, "However, things began changing with the advent of technology. The muggles became civilised and their obsession with 'burning witches' came to an end. The constant need for survival that forced the muggle-raised to perform magic was curbed and hence, their weakness as compared to the purebloods began. However, by the time this happened it was tradition to only introduce the muggle-raised to our world when the time came of schooling, coupling that with the stigma and resentment for the muggle-raised and the result being that governments have become generally unwilling to change."

"But Amanta if magic is all based on use and practice, then it has nothing to do with blood whatsoever!" His eyes were wide, "Then why bother with all this blood purity rubbish?"

She sighed, "As true as that is Harry, you are looking at it from a divided and decidedly scientific perspective. All these experiments and proofs and facts are relatively new, roughly within the last century or a little more at most. For generations and centuries,

magical families have honestly believed it to be based on blood. Tacking on the emphasis those magical families put on magical gifts, which is based on family magic and their views gained momentum. But it was always halted in the past because the muggle-raised were never weak or lesser in capability as compared to the wizard-raised. In recent times this has changed, now the muggle-raised are weaker and take a much longer time to have their magic at the same level as a fellow wizard-raised student. By the time they achieve that stage of equality, the idea of them being not as powerful, which they observe with their own two eyes throughout their schooling, forms mental blocks for many of them and they start restricting themselves from reaching their full potential. Lastly the absence of magical gifts which the purebloods and half-bloods who are generally the wizard-raised have in abundance tends to drive the nail in and weaken the muggle-raised's perception of their own worth."

She shook her head sadly, "it is a sad, twisted and convoluted cycle."

"Is that the purebloods only reason though? They've been told one thing for a long time so they will continue believing that regardless of facts to the contrary?" He was agitated.

"It is not so simply put Harry." She said gently, "Not every witch and wizard is as open-minded as you would want. For a long time, I, myself, believed that the muggle-borns were weaker because of blood because truthfully, there was no other explanation and that's what I was told. When I learnt to think for myself independently of my family and parents, I delved and tried to piece together the truth. Academic circles have helped enlightened me, but the average magical is not an academic. The average magical will believe what he or she has been told to believe by society and for the longest time, society has said and still continues to say in some places that blood makes all the difference. In fact, it is disgusting but in many of the Guilds of Magic in the world the idea of blood purity colours their views of incoming applicants."

His eyes were wide as he, for the first time, began to understand the scope of the problem, "Do all purebloods the world-over feel like this? Whether they act upon it by eradicating muggle-borns or not, do they believe that blood makes that much of a difference?"

She pursed her lips and considered her response, "It depends on the circles you travel in to be honest. The general trend is that the East is fairly advanced as a society as compared to the West because magic first originated and evolved there. Countries like Japan, China, Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka were the very basis of the original culture of magic, blood discrimination is abolished there and punishable by law. As you move westwards, the trend changes: The Magical Empire of Soviet Russia and most of the Middle Eastern nations followed the example set by the Far East and abolished blood discrimination early in the twentieth century. That decision was considered one of the reasons Grindelwald made a bid for power."

"Africa is possibly the last remnant of magical life as it used to be. Barring the more developed nations like Morocco, Algeria and South Africa, the rest of the African nations' magicals live alongside the muggles in complete openness. They do not hide, but merely obscure themselves as the 'Godmen' of the village or the healer with exceptional knowledge of Herbology."

"Western European nations like France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Britain fall below the standards, you are probably acutely aware of the state of affairs in your country. However, it gets worse, the Confederate States of Magical America and Western Britain, which you probably recognise as Canada, do not outright persecute the muggle-borns, but they follow a principle of 'separation'. There are separate schools for the muggle-borns and half-bloods, separate accommodation and shopping districts, everything is divided in such a way that the purebloods never interact with any muggle-borns at all, it is peaceful, but bound for disaster. The nations in South America and Australia are possibly the worst of all, muggle-borns are given rudimentary education and never allowed to rise above the station of clerk in any form of employment, they are not allowed to own property or trade, or be treated as human beings for that matter. All those muggle-borns are running towards Magical Brazil which is a safe-haven for them for the rest of the continent is ridden with blood-fanatics."

Harry sat back on the sofa as the enormity of the task hit him, "But now that we know the truth, we have proof and facts, why can't governments do something? What aren't they doing something?" Harry protested weakly.

"Perception Harry," she elaborated, "This bigotry is ingrained, the idea of blood making one stronger is ingrained in wizarding culture. There are many wizarding families who believe in the strength of blood, but they won't voice it to insult muggle-borns. Just because they think it's true doesn't mean they also think that muggle-borns have no right to perform magic and own wands. But those, like this Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters, they honestly believe that muggle-borns do not deserve their magic that they've stolen it somehow."

She snorted to herself, "I once remember when a distant relation at a wedding was going on and on about how he was going to prove that Inermia is caused by muggle blood mixing with pureblood. Let alone the fact that Inermia occurs only in pureblood families."

He perked up, "What is Inermia Amanta?"

She looked melancholy, "It is a sterility disease Harry, most commonly found in pureblood homes that have been marrying too closely for the recent few generations, rendering their children sterile or making it very difficult for them to have children."

"Amanta," He paused trying to frame his next question based on Malfoy and his observations of him, "Why do pureblood wizards who are blood-fanatics tend to be Dark Wizards?"

She sat up in her chair, her eyes wide in amazement, "That is a very serious accusation Harry. Dark Wizardry is never professed under any circumstances. Even when Grindelwald was captured, he agreed to all his crimes except to being a Dark Wizard. It is very, very rare that you will find a Dark Wizard in today's society, or in fact in history at all. We generally have one in every few generations."

He was surprised, "But I know of wizards who regularly perform magic that is restricted by the Ministry. Surely they are dark?"

She sighed in relief, "You are confusing two very different concepts, a dark family or dark magical as you see it simply performs magic that may be frowned upon or needlessly barred by a government, but their magic isn't truly horrendous or disfiguring. At the most, these wizards are Grey for adhering to rituals and practices that are not accepted in today's world or deemed barbaric. You will find that

Romania is a hubbub of Grey Wizardry, one of the reasons why Britain and Romania have never seen eye-to-eye."

She paused before continuing in a softer voice, "But Dark Wizardry is a magic so vile, so evil that it twists the very spirit. It reshapes a wizard from his natural state and perverts his magic to give him abnormal benefits. Indeed this branch of magic is so reviled that we rarely, if ever, speak of it in polite company. One of the basic rules of Dark Magic is bloody sacrifice, however killing is never enough; killing another being is the darkest of Grey magic, but to enter the realm of Dark Magic, every ritual, every act, every perversion is the result of pure, unadulterated, intentioned murder. That is the reason that any Ministry will kill a Dark Wizard on sight, because they have only achieved their Darkness by dabbling in the most dangerous and obscure of branches, which involve human sacrifice in the most disgusting of forms. All Dark Wizards, the second they set upon their path have only goal in mind: immortality."

He held his breath, "Why immortality?"

She was stone-faced, "Perversion of one's soul can destroy oneself. If one survives the destruction, it is but temporary. Sooner or later, even a Dark Wizard must die. They can perform their sacrifices and do their evils to extend their lifespan for centuries, but ultimately they must perish. When they do, there is nothing in store for them but Hell. Ozwich the Horrendous documented his dreams, which he termed 'visions' as he approached his death at the age of the 272. Ozwich had taken countless lives; he had murdered indiscriminately for his own benefit. When his death was upon him, Kronos himself tortured him for months, revealing his terrifying fate: to burn in the depths of Tartarus for all of eternity, to singe to pieces and yet retain consciousness while surrounded by hellfire and brimstone. Dark Wizards seek immortality because death means pain and torture beyond imagination... forever."

He was shocked into silence as he filed away all this new information. He knew that the topic of Dark Wizardry had unsettled the Amanta and his best bet would be to end the conversation quickly.

He decided that he had one last burgeoning question, "Amanta, when purebloods marry purebloods, is it justified for them to believe that that is good for them and their families? Because their children

will have an over-concentration of magical gifts that would be very advantageous."

She smiled, "I was wondering when you would ask that question. Yes, originally that was the way things worked. Known wizarding families would arrange unions with other known wizarding families and consolidate the abilities that their children might inherit and increase them as well. Unfortunately, with time, the number of 'known wizarding families' dwindled and they became known as purebloods, the elite few with many magical gifts in their family bloodlines."

She stopped and considered how to go on, "What is happening now is that blood-fanatic pureblood households are starting to marry their fourth and fifth cousins due to a lack of availability of other purebloods. Soon it will become third and second cousins and before you know it, it will be between siblings. It's a disgusting state of affairs but that is the direction it is headed. Due to this, the children being born are becoming progressively more...temperamental, prone to violence and to an extent more flawed and less balanced. When families go out and marry muggle-borns, they essentially refresh and renew their bloodlines from a strictly genetic perspective. Marrying muggle-borns adds no new magical gift to a family, but it adds freshness and longevity. It also decreases exponentially the chance of having a squib child."

"But if that is true then why are they such snobs?" He was astounded, "Shouldn't they be marrying muggle-borns to continue their oh-so-important family names? Surely not all of them are blinded by blood-fanaticism?"

She smiled despondently, "Some are blinded, but what is worse that those who aren't blinded, pretend to be for the sake of appearances. They marry their children to muggle-borns or even muggles in secret and in a large number of these cases, a child is born very soon and the muggle or muggle-born spouse dies in mysterious ways soon after."

He didn't understand the connection at first, but then it dawned on him and his face twisted into a horrible expression of disgust, "That's just sick!"

She gave him an impudent smile, "You wanted to know the particularities of wizard culture. Well I'll have you know that every surviving pureblood family that retains even a modicum of sanity or skill has more skeletons in their closet than they can bare to count."

With that enlightening comment, Harry had to leave. He felt if he had any more information, he might be sick.

Distraction of the worst kind

He stirred the cauldron despondently, not once letting his eyes wander, fixed directly at the frothing, pale liquid. He was being watched, but he didn't really realise it. His mind was completely shut off from the world, all his attention focused on his task.

It was funny really, how swiftly his life had changed from one end to another without him ever having a moment to catch his breath.

Recently, even those whom he had left behind at home seemed to occupy his mind whenever he was free enough to let his mind wander.

Unbidden images of Ron, Mrs. Weasley, Ginny, the twins, they would come floating in his mind. Their backs hunched, their postures defeated, their eyes red and swollen from crying. A single moment, a single incident that he had with Mr. Weasley stayed locked in his mind. The memory of him coming home after a long day's work: everyone was sitting around the fireplace in the living room, occupying themselves in some way or another, when the door opened and he entered with a loud cheer for everyone to hear.

A big smile plastered on his face, his face, though tired, lit up with happiness and indulgence at seeing his large and loving family.

He had never neglected to cast his fondness at Harry.

It was in those moments that Harry revelled. It felt almost... almost like the way he imagined his father would have looked at him whenever he came home. Mr. Weasley wasn't his father – he knew that – Mr. Weasley never even tried to be his father, but he gave Harry a bloody good idea of what it would have been like.

It hurt to think that his best friend would never have that gaze upon him ever again, it hurt to think that his best mate would now forever feel the same anguish that Harry felt but his would be worse because he would know exactly what was missing, it hurt to think he wasn't with Ron at this time.

Ron...

For all his faults, Ron was a good bloke; he always tried to do what was right, no matter what. Sometimes his jealousy and insecurity got in the way, but in the end, he would always do what was right. He wore his heart on his sleeve and charged into any situation if Harry told him to.

He smiled to himself sadly as he stopped his stirring to add some lacewing into the concoction and changed the intensity of the heat on the enchanted blue-green fire under the cauldron.

Everyone always assumed Harry was the golden boy, a Gryffindor through and through, maybe he was and maybe he wasn't. But the truth was that Ron was undeniably an ideal Gryffindor, he embodied the good and the bad traits: headstrong, impulsive and emotional with all the subtlety of a rhinoceros and foresight of a rock.

It was because of this overtly obvious nature of Ron's that Harry knew, for a long time, that his best mate had very strong feelings for their mutual best friend.

Ron loved Hermione, full stop.

But now... Did he have feelings for her too?

Harry restarted stirring the cauldron as he groaned to himself in frustration: he had played and replayed the scene, the event with her over and over and over again in his mind. It didn't make any more sense the millionth time than it did the first.

What possessed him? Why did he respond to Hermione like that? Why did he feel such an unquenchable need to thrust into her like a mad dog in heat?

Embarrassing questions with no answers in sight...

Yet, nothing seemed to take the cake like the newest head-turning situation that engulfed his life.

Sirius was his father...kind of.

He sighed as he began to bottle the potion, raising the ladle and adding the potion into an unbreakable vial he kept ready for the occasion.

What was he supposed to do now that he knew this? Hey Sirius, glad to know you're my papa and that you erased any and all essence of my real father's heritage from my person without even asking for my parents' permission, want to go have a pint?

When he left from England, he had promised Sirius he would write, he had intended to keep that promise, but then things got sticky...

What in the name of Merlin was he supposed to say?

Dear Sirius,

I'm elated that I actually have a father of some sort, but I still blame you for tarnishing my relationship with my real father in some way that I can't really explain or understand for that matter. I have a feeling that even though he treated you as a brother, removing him as the magical father of his firstborn isn't something that will go over well with him. But you never know after all...

Also the prophecy you mentioned has me a-tizzy but I think I'll prefer to draw out my life and refuse to come home, however I still rather not be considered a coward so I haven't the foggiest of what I'm going to do from hereon out.

Thanks to you I'm even more fucked in the head than before and its not like I needed anymore of that.

Love,

Harry.

Yeah, he tore up that letter faster than he could say 'oops' and incinerated it. What was most troubling was that that was the most

coherent and least emotionally charged letter he had managed to write.

"Harry?" Came Stefan's uncertain voice and Harry looked up in his direction.

"Yes Stefan?" He responded neutrally, hiding all inflections of his inner turmoil.

The aged Potions' Master seemed unsure, "Are you...well?"

He just cocked his head to the side and thought about that question.

Was he well? His best mate lost his father and was hurting. He nearly raped his other best friend by some otherworldly force compelling him. His godfather was actually his father and his father wasn't entirely his father. There was a prophecy dictating he had to kill the most evil Dark Lord in British history or be killed. Also the tiny detail that nobody seemed to believe that said Dark Lord was back and he was considered a deranged liar.

He could be the bloody subject of psychological analysis for the next decade and they would still never be able to sort him out.

"No." He responded succinctly, "But I'm coping with it."

A pregnant pause elapsed between the two wizards staring at each other: the younger apathetic and resigned, the older concerned and lost.

"If you say so then..." Stefan's voice trailed off and he exited the room without further comment.

His empty green eyes returned to the potion and he cursed himself for allowing himself to be engulfed by his inner torment. He needed to get this potion done and the shade was all wrong!

Biting back a curse, he waved his wand and vanished the contents of his cauldron, then restarted the painstaking process of brewing blood rejuvenation potion.

Reinforcements

Something was wrong with the boy, he need not be an Empathiser to be able to see it, it was plain as day.

Before, he was quiet and observant, but the energetic thrill in his eyes was never dim as he learnt something new or brewed a better potion than the standard recipe.

But now... now he just went through the motions as if it were what was expected of him. He seemed...burdened, like under a mild dementor effect at all hours.

Also, well, he just told him he wasn't exactly 'well' either; that was the final nail that needed to be hammered in to make things crystal clear.

He left Harry to his brewing, which, by a cursory glance, was looking like an utter disaster that he didn't have the heart to correct him for. He left the Apothecary and went to the one other person he could discuss the boy with.

In the few months since Harry had entered his life, it had been a therapeutic release for the Potions' Master.

Stefan Yelizarov was born to a middle-classed wizarding household, he was the sixth son in a family of nine and was quiet so easily overlooked. In his life he experienced only mediocrity, he was always unnoticed and that was just the way he liked it.

Only once had he changed whom he was, had he changed how he behaved and allowed himself to be noticed for his talent and success. He had done it for her, to impress her, to woo her and he had succeeded. She returned his feelings and the two of them lived happily for some years.

They had been living in Soviet Germany after the war and despite the hardships, they were happy. Then like life couldn't be better, his wife was with child: he was elated to be a father. They had planned it all, from the nursery to the opulence of their meagre home in preparation for their newborn child.

Revolution struck, the first in the line of many.

Warring factions of German Magicals separated them. It took him two years to track her down, two whole years where he lived and breathed his wife and unborn child. He was sent to a temporary prison and released when his status as pureblood was confirmed.

She wasn't so lucky because she was a muggle-born.

He found her in a brothel, obliterated of her memories, slave to an addiction to alcohol and in a permanent drug-induced state of mind. He had lost the woman he loved; she was no longer present in the woman he confronted who was a mere shadow of that vivacious and brilliant witch.

She died of sexually transmitted diseases six months later.

He never found out the fate of his child, he never knew if the child was a boy or girl, he never got to rock his child to sleep in the nursery.

In Harry, he found hope, in Harry he found a chance to meet the kind of man he hoped his child would grow up to be had it been a boy. As desperate and terrible as it sounded, Harry filled a long-empty hole in his heart. But he would never voice this, lest he scare the child away.

Harry was hurting, he was being bothered and torn apart by his emotions and he could tell no one of his feelings. He needed help.

Walking down the familiar cobbled lane, he approached the quaint larger-than-cottage home that was inhabited by Harry's Amanta. He knocked on the door quickly and shifted nervously from foot-to-foot.

The door creaked open and the old woman who barely made it to the height of Stefan's neck, but was still imposing enough to seem much taller appeared. Her eyes were wide and alert and her lips stretched into a thin, stern line. Upon noticing her visitor, her expression softened and she smiled genuinely.

"Master Yelizarov, to what do I owe the pleasure?" she asked in her high feminine voice.

He sighed, beating around the bush for pleasantries wasn't something he was ever particularly good at or fond of, "Harry needs

help. He cannot talk to me and he isn't talking to you, please do something."

She seemed taken aback slightly by his request but appeared to take it in her stride. She looked searchingly in his face for something and whatever it was; she seemed to find it and nodded resolutely in response.

"Indeed Master Yelizarov, I know of what you speak. Rest assured, I have called for...reinforcements, someone who may be able to relate to him better than you or I."

His mission accomplished he nodded and thanked her. Turning away, he heard her door close with a click and began the slow walk back to his apothecary. He could only hope the Amanta's plan would come to fruition; he hated to see Harry in pain.

As if it were a sharp stab, he finally accepted that saying goodbye to Harry would be very difficult for him, the boy was quiet, unassuming and decidedly powerful, just like himself.

He doubted he'd be able to handle the pain of losing someone again.

Well hello good-looking...or not...

It was with a steady gait that Harry made his way to the Amanta's home for his daily lesson. Being a bright day, Harry indulged himself with a little smile and kept his head low. He hadn't felt so light in some time; of course the fact that he had tired himself out the night before with his spell casting to the point that he could barely stay awake had helped tremendously.

Sleeping in a state of being utterly unconscious offered a unique release.

He opened the now-familiar door and removed his shoes by the entrance of the foyer.

"Its me Amanta," He called to the house in general waiting for the aged witch to make her presence known.

He walked into the foyer and found that it had been enlarged beyond the regular duelling rings that they practised in. A thin film of white curtains cut off a large part of the foyer from view.

Harry took out his wand, preparing himself for any eventuality because with the Amanta he could never be sure about anything. Placing his wand by the end of the curtain, he pulled it aside while standing a few feet away.

A jet of red light shot through the opening and Harry jumped back in alarm.

He waved his wand and with a murmured *Depulso*, he sent the white curtain flying inwards. It wrapped itself around a figure beyond the curtain and Harry kept his wand trained on it.

"*Stupefy! Incarcerous!*" Two beams of light emanated from his wand and struck the bound figure.

The person was stunned unconscious and fell over with bound ropes around it.

Harry approached it carefully, his wand still held aloft. He poked the unmoving body with his sock-covered foot and it didn't budge an inch beyond his effort to make it move. Feeling the tension drain away from him, he dispelled the conjured ropes and summoned the white curtain away from the figure.

The person – a boy – was turned on his back: he had short-cropped black hair, as ravenous as Harry's own, but it ended just below his neck. He was wearing a muggle sleeveless t-shirt and his thin arms were bared.

"*Ennervate!*"

He cast the spell and to his intense surprise the boy rolled away and got to his feet in a flash, he turned around and faced Harry with wide, disbelieving eyes.

"I didn't expect to be beaten so easily. Serves me right for being overconfident." He said in a soft, decidedly feminine voice.

His mouth was slightly agape as he regarded the boy, well, girl... she had an avian-like, sharp-looking face with a bone-structure that distinctly reminded him of the Amanta, her eyes were black, her nose button-like and she had a set of perfectly straight white teeth. The only indication, other than her voice, that this person was indeed, unquestionably a girl was the noticeably jutting bust on her chest and narrow waist that leaned towards one conclusion when it came to gender assessment.

"Who are you?" He asked not letting his wand drop.

"That was a very disappointing show child, I expected more from you." Came the distinctly disapproving voice of the Amanta, who appeared from behind the fireplace, her body no longer disillusioned. For the first time Harry heard that tone when it wasn't directed towards him.

The girl lowered her head and her eyes were downcast. "My apologies Bunica, I'll do better."

"See that you do." The Amanta said fiercely and then turned her head to Harry with a smile, "You responded well to an unknown situation Harry and trapped your opponent without engaging in combat. I am suitably impressed."

Harry just nodded sheepishly.

The Amanta then waved her hand in the direction of the girl and introduced her, "Harry, meet Monica cel Cumplit, my grandniece, she is a Journeywoman Arithmancer with considerable skill in duelling despite her performance today. She will be staying and joining our lessons in the weeks to come."

"Monica, meet Harry Potter, my apprentice." She stated succinctly.

She walked up to him with a spring in her step and pulled out her hand with a warm smile, "Hiya Harry, I've heard a lot about you. Nice to finally put a face to the name."

He nodded shyly, still not looking directly at her, he clasped her hand and shook it lightly, "Sorry about before with the...um..."

She just shrugged nonchalantly, "You win some, you lose some; but I'd be on my guard if I were you, I never underestimate the same opponent twice."

He smiled at her as she turned around and returned to stand beside the Amanta who was regarding them with a shrewd eye.

He wasn't quite sure...but he felt like it was the beginning of a new friendship.

Author's Notes:

1. First of all, a BIG thank-you to everyone who reviewed the last chapter, I had 50 reviews from that chapter alone and it was an overwhelming response, I'm honoured. Here's to a similar response!

2. This chapter was not supposed to be this long! Over 25k words? I have no idea what happened, but its like the scenes wrote themselves and I was just standing in the background waving the Outline I made frantically and being utterly ignored by my own Muse... I feel used somehow, which is kinda twisted because I feel used by myself... God help me, I need to get a life!

3. So Ron and Hermione are becoming more mature...hope it seems believable.

4. I had left the potion that Sirius and Remus were preparing hanging in midair with all the revelations in the last chapter. So the Dumbledore scene kind of tied that up nicely and helped expand on Dumbledore's position as Grand Sorcerer, which will be significant in chapters to come.

5. FYI: Fillius of = Son of, Et = And, Ròs = Traditional Scottish name meaning magical flower, dies = days, Locus = location, Tutis = Unknown, Parentis = Parent. (English to Latin Translator liberally used)

6. Anyone else notice a shift in Molly's character? Keep your eyes on her in chapters to come... *hint hint*

7. Mystery Agents raid Azkaban before Death Eaters and Agent Gold being Gilderoy Lockhart, I like to think its good recycling of Canon characters.

8. Bet nobody saw the identity of the Leader of the Department of Mysteries being Professor Sprout? I always thought there was some glaringly forgotten potential for that character.

9. Killing Cornelius was fun, I hoped it felt abrupt and shocking and then the anticlimax in the end of that scene where he did in fact die and Rosier got away was unexpected, to at least some of you.

10. Writing Cassandra's scene as she searched for her granddaughter was surprisingly easy, but it felt a bit iffy when doing so, so if you feel there is something that can be improved there, let me know. The mystery is growing regarding Cassandra Agnes Trelawney, it will come to a head soon enough.

11. FThanks to The Pyromaniac for letting me know the real way of naming a German pub. Its now just Schmidts.

12. I hope Harry's question-and-answer session with the Amanta cleared up some plot holes I had created in the previous chapters. Now you understand the basis of pureblood supremacy and modern magical theory and what it all amounts to. If something was unclear PM me or leave it in a review, I'll get back to you and if there is something big I missed in there, I'll edit and repost it in the chapter and thank you for pointing it out to me.

13. So a scene to expound on Harry's obvious problems because they just needed to be brought to the surface and he isn't dealing with them well.

14. The Stefan back-story is something that I hadn't really planned, but I have now created ANOTHER huge side-plot that will build into the main plot seemingly because I can! MUHAHAHA! *Ducks from the rotten tomato* It's a disease I tell you! I can't seem to help myself!

15. FYI: Bunica = Grandmother (English to Romanian translator)

16. Monica is an average-looking girl with a larger-than-average bust; she isn't a Mary Sue with a dark secret for those of you who want to point that out. There is only one Mary Sue with a dark secret in this story and that is Cassandra the Vampire. Also Monica will play a role in chapters to come, let me know what you think of her.

If you spot any errors and/or inconsistencies, PM me or leave it in a review and I'll change it as soon as possible.

If you plan on flaming me, not that I mind particularly, the least you could do is sign-in or leave some contact information so I can get back to you with some justification, however meagre, or even to offer my understanding of your reasoning if that's the case. Peace.

Anyway, GOOD reviews and even flames are appreciated and taken with a grain of salt or sugar respectively. Also, reviewing my work makes me work faster and type even faster. So if you want an update soon, feed me with reviews and it will guilt me to spend more time on my story.

That's all for now, thanks for sticking with The Road to Freedom for so long, the story is finally beginning to grow in the direction I'm planning and things are shaping up nicely.

With this chapter we're more than one-fourth of the way through! Yay!

NEXT CHAPTER: Don't ask when it will be up... let's leave it at sometime by the First week of March...if not sooner.

Thanks guys!

~ Gatonio.

CHAPTER SEVEN

GET IT RIGHT

What can you do when your good isn't good enough?

And all that you touch tumbles down?

Coz my best intentions keep makin' a mess of things.

I just wanna fix it somehow.

But how many times will it take?

Oh how many times will it take for me?

To get it right.

To get it right.

Get it Right ~Lea Micheale, Glee

Delusions of Free Will

Hermione Granger precariously pointed her wand at the snowy white owl. Her eyes were half-closed as she chanted a string of Latin words and jabbed her wand in different directions seemingly unconsciously.

The beautiful owl hooted every now and then, but overall it barely twitched as various colours and auras surrounded it, only to dissipate into wisps of smoke.

An indeterminable time later, she opened her eyes and slumped against the little rickety chair she had conjured in the Owlery. She regarded the owl with trepidation but greeted her with a tentative smile.

"Well that does it Hedwig, I think I got the last of the tracking charms and spells off of you." She said with relish.

"Specialus Revelo!" She chanted, followed by a practised wand movement.

Hedwig lit up in different colours, but soon the colours began to fade away entirely until a nondescript white aura surrounded the avian entity.

"Yes, for sure Hedwig, its all been removed." She nodded. "You're free, for now."

The owl, for her part, chose to tilt her head sideways and hoot in a questioning manner towards her. Under ordinary circumstances, interpreting this movement as an opening for communication between a human and an owl would be ludicrous. However, they were at a school of magic, the human involved was a witch and the owl often delivered mail with no addresses attached and by a wild assumption, probably knew how to read as well. Despite being considered the most logical witch of her time, Hermione chose to take up the owl's movement as an offer to speak.

"I know Harry wanted you to stay with me Hedwig," she assuaged the owl who once again hooted, "but things have changed since he left. You have had more tracking charms and hexes placed on you than I can count. Any mail you may be remotely attached towards is checked thoroughly. I also think that they are growing restless watching you. It would be best for us all Hedwig, if you went back to Harry. I know you can find him if you so choose."

She clasped her hands in front of her and looked at the bird with wide, compelling eyes, "Will you go back to him?"

Hedwig was quiet for some time and to a logical person, it would have seemed as if it were actually considering the question, which lent credence to the fact that it really was an intelligent owl. It hooted affirmatively in response.

The witch brightened considerably at that and she cooed at Hedwig. She then proceeded to conjure some parchment, a quill, and an inkwell and set to write a letter.

"Hedwig, since you will be going back to him, you would please take this to him from me." She said as she began to scratch away at the parchment.

She shifted the parchment this way and that and adjusted it into a perfect right angle to the Owlery ledge as she thought of how she wanted to phrase her words. Absent-mindedly she ran a perimeter charm to check for hidden recording and/or spying spells of any sort. She then set up an alarm ward on the doorstep of the owlery to indicate the arrival of any unexpected student.

Setting her jaw into a hard line, she dipped the quill into the inkwell and started writing.

Dear Harry,

I hope you are well and learning wherever you are. Things at Hogwarts are quickly deteriorating to a terrible state. Remember that woman Umbridge I told you about? She's making life hell...

She paused and looked at her scarred hand with distaste. The marks from her 'detentions' would probably never entirely fade. She soldiered on with her letter.

Anyway, Umbridge has rounded up a group of students called the Inquisitorial Squad; it's basically a smattering of Slytherins who agree with her agenda. The Squad has been granted essentially the same rights and powers as Prefects and the Head Pupils. I think Umbridge is making them check all the incoming mail into the school.

When you left, Hedwig turned up at my window and has been with me ever since. But they've placed more tracking charms on her than even I knew counters for. They crossed a line however when they hexed her last night. I've decided that it would be best for Hedwig if she were away from Hogwarts so I'm sending her back to you. Also she misses you.

Don't worry I removed all the trackers on her before sending her off; you can trust me on this. She wouldn't have left if I hadn't after all.

Satisfied that she had stated all the pertinent reasons for sending Hedwig back, she chewed the end of the quill worriedly as she pondered how to proceed to the next important point of her letter without sounding rude. With a sigh she waffled on.

Ron is fine, well as fine as he can be. You cannot imagine how happy he was that you came, he was of course devastated that you

left soon after, but he appreciated you coming nonetheless. I was glad you came too.

I think I should mention that Ron and I are officially dating each other now. He makes me happy Harry and I think he needs me as much as I need him. All that happened between us that night is in the past as far as I'm concerned. I love you Harry, but just...not in the same way, or I think not in the same way as Ron. It took me a lot of confusion and deliberation to come to this decision Harry, but...I love Ron, I really do. I also know that you care for me and cherish our friendship enough not to let this tear us apart.

Don't hesitate to send me an owl if you want to. No matter what, I do love you, am here for you, and always will be.

Yours always,

Hermione.

There... She thought triumphantly as she signed of her name, to the point, simple, and complete. She folded the parchment up and tied it gingerly to Hedwig's leg. The owl promptly jumped off the ledge, spread its wide, white wings, and flew off into the distance.

She watched its progress until Hedwig became an indistinguishable blur in the sky. After having sighed in relief, Hermione packed away her belongings, and began to descend from the Owlery.

She was coming down the winding staircase and entering into the main castle when she stopped dead in her tracks. She was in a secluded part of the castle and it was quite early in the morning, which made it even less populated than usual. The castle was dark in the early hours with the only source of sunlight pouring through a large window to her side, casting shadows in all directions. Right opposite her stood a young witch she vaguely recognised. A wand was perched behind her left ear, her face obscured by the darkness. Tresses of dirty, uncombed blonde hair fell over her shoulders. Her robes were put on in a haphazard fashion and she was wearing different coloured socks.

"Hello Hermione." The girl said in a detached, cool voice.

Hermione sucked in a breath to compose herself, for some inexplicable reason the witch in front of her unnerved her. She peered closely in order to recognise the girl, "Er... hello... Luna!" She exclaimed with dawning realisation. "You gave me a fright. Erm...so how are you?"

The eccentric witch merely twitched her head from side-to-side in response, "Peachy as a blubbering humdinger during Yule."

"Right..." she answered not having any idea what a 'humdinger' was, let alone its peachiness during Yule.

They stood in awkwardness from thereon out, well, Hermione felt awkward. Unable to start a conversation and the silence stretched. She gravitated between walking away with a hasty goodbye and trying to say something nice to the lonely yet peculiar witch.

Luna decided to break the silence ultimately, "It will not work."

The Gryffindor's eyes snapped at the dreamy witch, "Pardon me?"

In the past three-and-a-half years that Hermione had been aware of Luna and her oddities, she had always seen the girl as possessing a strange charm with her characteristic aloofness. For the first time, she saw the blonde witch look at her with large, protuberant blue eyes that held neither a jot of distraction nor abstraction.

"It will not work, a mere missive cannot resolve the tension that sings in your veins." She enunciated.

Hermione tightened her hand around her wand, "How did you know of my letter?"

The blonde witch's lips quirked into a sardonic smile, "Magic."

Admittedly she walked right into that one, but it wasn't a sufficient enough answer. "Luna, please tell me the truth," she said, unwilling to raise her wand against the loony Ravenclaw. "This is important."

Of all the reactions she anticipated, she did not expect to see the witch in front of her merely tilt her head sideways and regard her with a cold, calculating gaze. "The truth is a beautifully cruel mistress. But if it is truth you desire Hermione, truth you shall

receive. Your blood sings, it calls to me, sears my spirit, and tempts my soul. You are powerful. You are tainted," she licked her lips and shivered, "Its...intoxicating." Her expression devolved from cold to somewhat maniacal.

Hermione was suitably troubled by her obsequiousness. She pointed her wand at the blonde who hadn't moved an inch from her position of leaning against a rounded pillar, her body held upright with a surreal fluidity. The Gryffindor took several steps away from her, her eyes trained directly at the witch.

"How do you mean?" Hermione whispered. "You're making no sense to me Luna."

Luna abruptly broke into a loud, braying laugh. Hermione felt chills run up her wand arm in response to the wickedness of what she was witnessing.

"Let me be candid then Hermione," Luna said in a quiet whisper, "Something within you has awoken and it is... powerful. I do not understand where it has come into you from, as it was not there before you left. Also your letter, it will serve no purpose."

Hermione brushed aside the comments of a 'something' awakening within her for the time being, she chose to ask about what bothered her more then, "How do you know what I wrote in my letter? Nobody was there when I wrote it, I checked to make sure."

The blonde witch shrugged, as she reverted back to her standard dreaminess in an instant, "I know not what was in it, but the Trivalent Tim-tuppers tell me that you tried to change your role."

She leaned forward, her first discernible movement since the bizarre conversation started, "You are pivotal in it all." She said eerily, demandingly, "Fate may have declared a Hero, but every Hero has a Heroine, it is the natural way of things. It must get bad and bad to worse before it gets better. Deviation from the natural path will only pave the way for disaster."

She brusquely turned around and began to walk away, a dumbstruck Hermione left in her wake. She gathered her bearings at an alarming pace, Hermione allowed the crazy witch's ramblings to

sink into her consciousness. In the miasma of meaningless chatter, she knew what had just been communicated to her.

"I am my own woman!" Hermione hurled at the blonde's retreating back, "I love Ron! I know I do! Go tell whatever Power or Deity you worship that that is the way things are and my free will is my own."

Luna stopped in her tracks, "It is ironic," she said without turning around, her eyes trained ahead into the empty, dark passageway. The words were slowly slipping from her mouth as if she tasted them first, "The one whose existence is mapped by Fate, believes she has a will of her own."

With that last enlightening comment, the eccentric Ravenclaw sashayed away. A visibly dumbfounded Hermione Granger was left behind and profanities were muttered a mile a minute about 'batshit crazy bints.'

My Time, Your Time.

Ron observed the incoming pairs and triplets of students with caution, his wand held aloft the whole time. After all, one could never be too careful. Once everyone was settled in, he moved his wand away, and nodded at the assembled group of the PA in greeting.

"I have an announcement," Came a call from one of the Weasley twins.

"Go on." Ron allowed.

The twin cleared his throat dramatically, "As you are all aware, every year, the teachers choose one student per discipline to represent Hogwarts at the Guilds of Magic. Well, this year Professor Flitwick originally chose Darren Sheets of Ravenclaw as the Hogwarts Apprentice to the Enchantment Guild."

With a proud stretch, the twin straightened up his shoulders, and went on, "Sheets backed out and now, I, the glorious George Weasley, have been offered to take his place."

Everyone applauded and he bowed dramatically to drink in the praise. Fred was surprisingly humourless at the revelation and only nodded towards George in acknowledgement.

After a few more announcements, they broke off into pairs and started the duelling practice that they had been working on for weeks. Ron stood on his side of the room and faced off his girlfriend with a large grin on his face. It was still a bit new, to refer to her as his girlfriend, but he liked it... there was something inherently right in that title.

The two of them exchanged a few curses to warm up and then began to duel in earnest. It was mostly harmless jinxes and hexes as they were working on improving their aim that evening. With a flourish he let loose a long string of stinging hexes, Hermione jumped to the side but got grazed by one on her ankle and she doubled over in surprise. She clasped her heel and began to mutter oaths under her breath. Ron ran up to her and crouched beside her. He cast a numbing charm before he performed the counter-curse.

"Are you alright Hermione?" He asked with his eyes alight in concern.

"Yes, why wouldn't I be?" She snapped just a bit too quickly, it was enough to confirm his suspicion that something was indeed bothering her.

"Hermione..." He droned and she sniffed at him. He sighed, the girl was worse than his mother!

"Hermione, please tell me what's bothering you." He implored as he helped her up and she snatched her hand away from his grasp rudely.

"Honestly Ron, there's nothing wrong with me!" She snapped again and he regarded her with a touch of exasperation and anger.

She was about to walk away when he latched onto her arm and whirled her around with a rather convincing sneer, "You're distracted, your wandwork is sloppy, and you snapped at me for showing concern. You're torn about something and you don't have an answer to whatever it is yet. Merlin forbid Hermione Granger ever asked for

help before she had the solution mapped out!" He ground out through gritted teeth.

Her eyes flared up in righteous indignation, "You think you have me all figured out?" She said with building rage.

Ron took an imposing step forward, his eyes bored directly into hers, "Yeah. I know you Hermione."

She was taken aback by his open admission and was about to retort back at him when he swooped down and kissed her. His one hand trapped both of her tinier ones behind her back and the other wrapped around her waist as she struggled to break his impromptu snog. Soon enough, she melted into his embrace and returned the kiss with equal vigour.

"Break it up!" Ginny yelled from across the room, "I swear I'm scarred for life!"

Amidst loud catcalls and wolf-whistles, the two teenagers broke their heated snog to the amusement of their friends.

"So what was bothering you?" Ron asked while he tried to get his breathing under control.

"Huh?" She responded still lost in her bliss, "Oh yeah... that." She sighed before deciding that he could probably give her a better perspective on Luna's creepy warning.

CREAK!

The door to the Room of Requirement began to creak open. Everybody stopped all action. In a flurry of motion, the Potter Alliance was standing in a straight line that faced the door with their wands pointed ahead, they had practised for an eventuality of that sort.

When the door was fully open, a young witch waltzed in. She literally waltzed in, as she pretended to dance with an imaginary man, one hand in the air supposedly on the man's shoulder and the other held up intertwined with her dancer's hand. She was humming an odd tune as she swayed from side-to-side, her wand shifted precariously

as it was resting behind her left ear. She stopped when she saw the bemused looks of the PA directed at her.

"Hermione and Ginny invited me," she said as way of greeting, "they said to come join the PA, the time is right now."

Ginny stifled her giggles and asked with a straight face, "What do you think PA stands for Luna?"

The blonde witch shrugged, "Performing Arts? I'm afraid I couldn't get a partner on such short notice, but Mr. Darcy rose to the occasion, although he brooded the whole way through." She introduced the thin air beside her as 'Mr. Darcy'.

"Erm..." Ginny fumbled at a loss for words, "Luna, PA is the Potter Alliance. We work on duelling and spells...not performing arts."

"Oh." The witch simply popped her lips and turned to 'Mr. Darcy', "Guess I won't be needing you after all good sir. Say hello to Elisabeth for me." To the further disconcertion of everyone present (sans Luna of course) the door slammed shut after she waved goodbye to 'Mr. Darcy'.

"Welcome then Luna..." Ginny said with an uneasy shrug, "You can...practice with me."

The witch nodded along but she simply walked past Ginny and went towards Hermione who was regarding her with a pensive expression. Luna picked her wand from behind her ear and gestured with it.

"This is my time," she whispered, "Is it yours?" Her decibel level was low enough so that only Hermione could hear her.

Hermione bit her lip thoughtfully and frowned at the witch. She pulled her wand out and faced Luna with a duelling stance as well, "Apparently not."

"Glad we agree."

For the Love of my Son

He was tittering from side to side, as he swished his wand and cleaned the murkiness and growing infestations in the walls with

practised ease. He had been doing the same chores for a few months then.

"Scourgify!" He said with a wave and cleaned a few doxy droppings he found in one of the armoires.

He gripped his wand and pointed it another direction when he felt there was little more to clean in that niche of the room. This was getting repetitious and mundane and he was growing restless. No matter what he did, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't distract himself from the nagging thoughts of his son. He wanted to be out there with him, wherever he was. His free-spirited mettle demanded immediate liberation from his own personal hell and he could think of no place more comforting than with his son.

Sirius Black was torn and hurt because he was worried beyond measure and had yet to receive a single scrap of news. "Where are you?" He mused to himself as he swept away some more dirt. "Why aren't you here?" He said as he forcefully jabbed his wand at a particularly vicious fungal growth behind a bookshelf. "I am your father and you dare to disobey me!" He said as he ran his arm in a wide arc that covered the room. Red sparks involuntarily erupted from the tip and whammed into a nearby desk chair, they broke its legs and made it fall to the ground in a heap.

"They say talking to yourself is the first sign of insanity." Came a sarcastic comment from his side.

Sirius turned and pointed his wand at the intruder, seeing whom it was he sighed in relief and turned back to his cleaning. A part of him just wanted to lash out at anyone at that point. The visitor merely rolled his eyes at Sirius' overdramatic nature and withdrew his own long cherry wand. He then proceeded to cast a strong reparo charm on the recently devastated chair.

"Talk to me about insanity when your teenage son prophesied to kill a Dark Lord runs away and refuses to correspond with you. When he abuses your faith in him and breaks his promises. Also you're on the run from said Dark Lord, the government, and stuck in the one place you hate more than prison itself." Sirius listed off the problems almost in a monotone.

"Someone's in an awful mood," Remus continued in his facetious vein, "Well have you a solution beyond brooding and an obsession with cleaning that would put Molly Weasley to shame?"

The animagus' back straightened at the last comment and he looked at his fellow Marauder with half-lidded eyes, "I could use some help..." The werewolf sat down on a chair he had finished repairing and indicated with a wave of his hand that he should continue. For his part, the ex-convict looked around the room carefully. His wide eyes were distrustful of anything and everything within. With jab and complicated hand-motion, he set up a privacy bubble before starting with his explanation.

"I want to find Harry, Remus." He said by way of explanation, "Wherever he is, I want to be with him, to support him, and perhaps even knock some sense into him. Also give him a piece of my mind about not writing to his father when he promised to do so."

Remus raised an eyebrow in consternation, "Don't you think you're being a bit harsh with him? You barely gave him any time to adjust to the idea of you being his father. Also he probably feels betrayed that he had to figure it out for himself rather than hear it from you."

He huffed in exasperation. "I was going to tell him...soon, maybe..."

"Well," the werewolf said rising from his seat and stretching his arms until the joints snapped, "You say you expect him to treat you as a father, but the question begs to be answered, what have you done that deserves that kind of respect? How have you been a father to him?"

Sirius was hurt by his friend's words, but he rapidly used that hurt to fuel his ire, "How dare you? I was in Azkaban! I would have never let it happen otherwise! He is my son and I am going to find him!"

Something within the animagus was burning, a raging inferno begged to break through. In that moment, as the culminated righteous indignation of his unlawful incarceration for twelve years, the sting of betrayal, the hopeless love for his son, and the desperation of his situation set in, something akin to a proverbial dam burst within the unstable man.

His friend tried to placate him, "Now Sirius don't be rash and rush into this. There's a lot to consid—" Remus tried to reason with him, his hands were up in a calming gesture but it was all in vain.

"Stupefy!"

A strong beam of light emerged from Sirius' wand. The poor wolf had not been expecting an attack of any sort from one he considered his brother. Before he could even think of defending himself, he was hit in his chest, the light was absorbed through his robes into his body, the magic supercharged his nerves, and soon enough, his unconscious form fell to the ground of the room in an unceremonious heap.

"Sorry Moony," Sirius said without really feeling or sounding sorry, "but some things just need to be done."

He marched out of the room and headed to the lower foyer of the house. With a deft flick of his wand he summoned his belongings. From one of the upper floors, a medium-sized travelling trunk raced along the floor and scraped its way like a dog that ran to heed his master's call. As the trunk dragged itself to catch up with Sirius, its bulky weight was clearly obvious with the clunky sounds that it made as it came down the staircase. The fact that everything the ex-convict needed was packed and ready to go showed that he had been debating to do this for some time. Having shrunk his trunk and kept it snugly in his robe-pocket, he descended the stairs entirely and headed towards the door while the portrait of his mother was screeching behind him.

"Merlin's beard! Sirius, what are you doing?" Came an irate voice from behind him as the blinds to his mother's wailing portrait were hastily drawn. He turned around to find the large frame of a woman clothed in shabby robes and an apron, desperately clutch the hangings to draw the hangings in to shut off the incessant screams. Without even waiting for her to finish her task appropriately, Sirius raised his wand in a manner reminiscent to his encounter with Remus a few minutes and said, "Stupefy!"

Another uncalled for stunner was shot at an unsuspecting victim in Number 12 Grimmauld Place that evening. The red beam of light surprised her. Just in the nick of time, she jumped to the side and

was on the other side of the doorway to the kitchen. Her red hair was fanning her face in angry curls as she looked at him with shock.

"What was that for?" She yelled in a voice usually reserved for the twins.

"I'm leaving Molly," Sirius said in a flat tone. His body stood straight, almost inhumanly still, as he raised his wand once more and took aim, "you're wasting my time. Stupefy! Stupefy! Stupefy!" He shot a few more stunners at her.

Molly was flabbergasted by the unprovoked attack, but she was a little better prepared for such a response. She raised a sloppy protego shield to block them off. A light yellow translucent screen appeared in front of her, it covered her head to toe and adsorbed the incoming stunners with a little effort. The Weasley matriarch winced when the third and final stunner was deflected as the exertion was beginning to bother her.

"SIRIUS BLACK! STOP THIS MADNESS THIS INSTANT!" She boomed in her most authoritative voice.

Sirius quickly grew frustrated by her blocking and yells at him to come to his senses, so he let loose a particularly vicious curse. It was an area wide shocker. A bright blue arc of magical energy that pulsed with electric-like waves was hurled at the redheaded witch. Molly reacted as best as she could, she ducked, and swerved under the curse, missing it by a hair's breadth. A single electric spark latched onto her open hair and she received a minor shock as a result. Second passed and she got to her feet unsteadily, greatly unnerved by the loud crash behind where the curse hit the wall. That was a dangerous curse that could have killed her!

She angrily shouted, "Diffindo!"

As the yellow spits of energy cut across the space that separated her from Sirius, she was expecting him to either block or avoid it. He didn't even react as the cutting curse nipped his shoulder and his blood went spraying onto the wall beside him. The chalk white wallpaper, only washed clean a day ago was splattered with dark red liquid that dripped down and left its long trail clearly behind. Sirius didn't even bat an eye, like a daemon, he merely raised his wand and shot a bone-breaking curse at her.

Molly knew the cutter had to have hurt of the blood was any indication. As she noticed the orange curse come towards her, she rapidly raised a rubble shield from the ground. A specialised spell she covered in seventh-year Charms, the pieces of broken furniture and grime that surrounded her rose into the air at a rapid pace and formed a protective cocoon of sorts around the caster. It worked well to head off the bone-breaker and the subsequent red stunner that struck it. However, she was gritting her teeth, the words were coming out more laboriously than before to keep the spell going, when a hint of the bone-breaker curse penetrated her defence, grazed her left shoulder, and dislocated it.

She hissed in pain, as her free hand wrapped around her aching shoulder to try to soothe it in some way. Even though her wand was faced downwards, she continued to chant under her breath to keep the rubble shield up and functioning, as Sirius' barrage of spells didn't let up. She took her wand in her non-wand hand and pointed it to her shoulder. She had to time it right for the minute she uttered a healing charm, the rubble shield that was protecting her would fail and she would have to run for cover.

Mentally she counted back from three. When she thought one, she muttered a quick episkey to stem the blood loss that was staining her robes. Her shoulder wound was numbed for the time being but her wand arm was still not functional. The curtain of debris she was hiding behind fell a second after and she ran behind the grand staircase near her for cover. Once securely behind it, she quickly applied a numbing charm over the healing charm to make her arm relatively mobile again. As Sirius saw her huddle for safety, he took two steps before he renewed his attack. She frantically looked around for something, anything to give her an advantage. Her eyes fell on the troll-leg umbrella stand and the assortment of four mounted house-elf heads in front of her. Sirius shot a few more spells that completely decimated the stands of the staircase that were obscuring her.

She didn't wait for a second after she was exposed. "Depulso Maximus!" With several quick, overpowered banishing charms, she hurled all the elf heads in the mad wizard's direction.

Sirius blinked once slowly when he saw the elf heads fly through the air towards him. He swirled his wand once and then twice to unleash

two silent cutters, which cleaved through two flying heads. But a third bumped him rather viciously on his forehead. Once again, he didn't even pay attention to the bruise that was quickly forming on his head and was only mildly distracted when the fourth head banged into his chest before falling to the floor. Molly took the initiative to engage him with several quick hexes and jinxes to hopefully trip him up. Outstandingly enough, it seemed as if Sirius knew the counters or perfect shields to each and every one of her attacks.

She was frustrated by her lack of progress and decided that a little enchantment might help her situation. Her wand snapped to her side and she animated the troll-leg umbrella stand. The once inanimate object immediately came to life and began to roll itself towards Sirius, ready to pounce on him when close enough.

Molly observed how Sirius' attention was drawn to the animated stand and she further pressed her advantage, "Confringo!"

The blasting hex was aimed at Sirius, who neatly jumped out of the way and avoided it entirely. However, the attempt proved successful as the animated troll-leg umbrella stand took his distraction as an invitation and jumped off the ground. It then proceeded to slam into his face and knock him over. With a loud crash, Sirius' body fell to the ground, and his head hit the wooden floor with an audible thwack. For the first time since the duel commenced, he moaned in pain as he clutched his broken nose and bleeding face.

The witch sighed in relief and moved from behind the cover of what was left of the stairway. She walked in his direction, wand raised.

"Stupefy!" She said.

A red stunner was shot at him, but it seemed he still had some fighter's spirit left in him. He rolled away from the red beam and raised himself up, so it seemed like he was sitting on the ground. One hand was still on his face and blood was pouring from between his fingers. He garbled out an attack, "Confringo!" He shot a blasting hex right back at the redheaded witch.

She jerked herself out of the way, her body twirled, and stopped against the wall right underneath the screaming portrait of Walburga Black, who oddly enough was yelling encouragements and

platitudes at Sirius. The blasting hex impacted on the remainder of the stairway she had been hiding behind. Bits of wood and splinter flew in all directions as she raised another shield to protect herself from the explosion.

Sirius chose that moment to heave himself back on his feet and fire a stunner at her. She barely had time to react when it caught her off-guard and she acted on instinct. With a mad arching swish of her wand, she summoned the falling debris from the staircase to encase her front and adsorb the stunner once again.

He growled in irritation at her repeated survivals of his attempts and he let loose several darker spells at her, which she scarcely avoided. Increasingly she felt like the proverbial fly that was waiting to be squatted. She knew that if she didn't come up with something very soon, Sirius would indeed squat her. With a circle hand-motion of her wand, she animated the wood splinters on the floor to attack. The little, yet sharp, pieces of wood were hurled with a mighty force in Sirius' direction. He jumped to his side and managed to miss the worst of the attack, but several pieces did catch onto his right arm and penetrate his skin, which elicited a sharp groan from the man. His concentration wavered, as his grip on his wand loosened to latch onto his hurting arm that was beginning to bleed.

"Expelliarmus!"

She took advantage of the diversion and disarmed him of his wand. The blue spell hit him dead on and his wand went flying from his hand right into Molly's outstretched palm. He turned to glare at her, but before he could attempt anything else, the redhead shot a stunner at him.

The red beam pierced the air between the two and hit the haggard and battered wizard full on. She couldn't put into words her relief, when the ex-convict lost his balance to unconsciousness, and fell onto his back. The matriarch fell to her knees in exhaustion, her hands fisted on her knees, a thin sheen of sweat was covering her brow, and she wiped it away as she tried to regain her breath.

She was woefully out of practice. There was a time when a duel like that would have winded her slightly, but that was all. She had let her magic get out of shape and now she could barely stand after having used intensive magic. She needed to do something about that.

She breathed deeply. When she felt her heartbeat and pulse return to a normal rate, she raised her wand and did the appropriate hand gestures with slowly but carefully. At the end of the movement, she called out weakly, "Expecto Patronum."

A bright, silvery hen appeared from her wand and she sent it to Dumbledore post-haste. After having released the silver mammal, she felt even more winded, but did not relinquish control to her mounting weariness.

The clock ticked as Molly kept her eyes trained on the nearby grandfather clock and her wand trained on the unconscious wizard, unwilling to chance any sudden movements from the mad wizard. It took a total of five minutes, but the door to Grimmauld Place slammed open. First to emerge through, in all his bright silver bearded glory and half-moon spectacles was the Headmaster. He was wearing, in his typical fashion, bright golden robes with silver stars that shone alternately. His trusted friend closely followed him. Still disfigured and missing several body parts, Mad-Eye Moody, limped into the room with his magical blue that was rotating round and round, examining the surroundings. Last came in a man draped in austere black robes that sharply contrasted his pallid complexion, Severus Snape.

The Headmaster surveyed the damage to the Entrance Foyer with interest and his eyes ultimately gravitated towards the prone form of Sirius Black on the ground, as he was bleeding profusely. He then took in the image of a tired and heavily breathing Weasley matriarch near the ruined staircase.

Without waiting for an order, the scarred Auror began to fix up the unconscious ex-convict. Severus marched towards Molly. He completely ignored Moody and his efforts with Sirius. He bent down in front of the witch, ran his hands in his robe-pocket, and retrieved a pepper-up potion that she gratefully accepted. He was working on her dislocated shoulder as she drank it.

"Thank you Severus." She said.

He actually smiled, "No Molly. Thank you."

Dumbledore shook his head disappointedly at his potions' master's priorities and began to question Molly. She gave a full account of what happened, how she found Sirius ready to storm out, how he attacked first without any warning, how his spells became more and more lethal, and how she ultimately subdued him in his moment of weakness. He nodded along and listening silently as she explained herself. When she was done, he thanked her, then assured her Sirius would be healed, and put back to his better temperament in no time. Dumbledore then walked up to Sirius and looked down at him with consternation. He could not understand why Sirius reacted so violently.

A shine of gold metal caught his eye.

Carefully, he bent his knees and reached out his wrinkled hand to open the top button of Sirius' travelling cloak. Buried within the material, he found a rather large gold chain ensconced inside. He used his thumb and forefinger to try to pry open the locket attached, but it wouldn't budge. The pendant was rounded and had a large, snake-like 'S' emblazoned on the front.

"Interesting..." Dumbledore said as his one hand fingered the necklace and other stroked his beard, "Very interesting indeed."

Family Reunions are Messy Affairs

Cassandra walked along the beautiful seaside at sunset. It was a picturesque view as the sun was perched above the horizon and its last rays were spreading its warmth before the onset of the cold night. The golden beams reached the white shore and illuminated the little pebbles along the way, making the odd little bauble shine in the golden-brown sand.

She paid the beauty around her no mind, so focussed she was on her task. A week ago, she had arrived in Nice and immediately approached the local city council. With a few well-placed spells and some compulsions the officials were putty in her arms. The formal listing of the city revealed there was no one on the register named Cassandra Trelawney, or Cassandra Black, or any other variation that she could think of.

Just when she was about to leave the council house disheartened, a last desperate idea struck her. She looked through the list, and

found a name that nearly made her giggle. It appeared, as if Cassie was indeed a Department of Mysteries Agent through and through.

'Black, Amara,' was listed in the recordings as living in a small cottage, on the seashore, since 1946.

An culmination of all those reasons, resulted in the vampire standing in front of a well-maintained and quaint beach house on the Mediterranean shore in Nice. It was a muggle home, by all accounts. Using her wand, Cassandra performed several complicated spells and detection charms on the house to indicate the presence of wards or frequent use of magic in general within the house. Nothing registered from her spells, not even ward residue on the house and its surroundings to indicate the presence of a witch. She sighed, already having begun to doubt her findings' before even knocking on the front door.

Mustering her resolve, she approached the large brown door, which was decorated with a sharp-looking knocker in the shape of a Christian cross with a long, thin leg connecting with the rounded knocker and a thicker horizontal metal line that was curved at the edges. It was a pale silver colour that glinted in the sunlight although it appeared worn from disuse. She lifted the knocker and tapped on the door three times and waited.

There weren't a great many things that could make a vampire nervous, but for the first time in a century, as she stood outside the door of possibly her granddaughter, she was sweating in nervousness. She rubbed her palms together and her stomach knotted in anticipation, excitement, and fear.

There was a noise on the other side that her keen hearing picked up easily. She could pinpoint it as the sound of floorboards being bent under the slow gait of an elderly person.

"J'arrive! J'arrive!" Came a high-pitched voice that could only belong to an old woman.

Cassandra bit her lip in order to prevent herself from crying out as she saw the doorknob being turned and the door being creaked open. This was the moment when she would finally see one of her own blood, her last remaining family.

On the other side of the threshold stood a woman of average height who hadn't opened the door entirely but chose to peep out at her visitor instead. Her hair was mostly grey, but hints of its' original black colour were noticeable. She was plump, and wore a long, red dressing robe that looked silken. Her face was covered in wrinkles making her appear aged and wise. She wore spectacles and her eyes were narrowed into slits as she stared at her visitor closely, as if trying to recognise her.

"What do you want dearie?" She asked in a slightly kinder voice when she saw what was plainly a scared girl in her late-teens regarding her with utter fascination.

The vampire could not place that woman. She looked nothing like the girl in the photographs she had seen of her granddaughter. It was worth remembering though that the most recent photograph she had was fifty years old and peoples' appearances change in that time. Any misconceptions she had were forgotten when the sunlight lit up the old woman's eyes and Cassandra recognised them to be exactly like her own. Bright amber eyes looking right back at her.

"C—Cassie? Cassandra Trelawney?" The vampire asked in a soft whisper unable to believe her eyes.

Is that how she would have looked had she aged? Cassandra couldn't help but wonder.

The old woman balked and took several steps back in fright. Her lips were running quickly and her words were coming out even faster. She was muttering in rapid fire French.

"Mon dieu! C'est pas possible! Qui es-tu? Dit-moi!"

Cassandra's French was passable, but she wasn't an expert in the language, and at that moment she could barely comprehend a word from her granddaughter.

"What?" She asked in French, trying to get her pronunciation right.

"C'est incroyable." The old woman said, as she calmed a little.

It dawned upon her that the teenager could not understand her so she switched into English, "Who are you? How did you find me? How do you know that name?"

Cassandra took a moment to regain her composure. When assured that the old woman that was facing her was indeed her granddaughter, she took a bold step forward, and raised her hands in a placating gesture.

"I found you through the muggle registry. I know your real name because I have been searching for you and it was surprisingly difficult to track you down. The only reason I have found you is because of sheer luck more than anything else." She was taking several hesitant steps forward while speaking. She stopped when a few feet separated them.

She placed her hands forward, palm up, as if hoping she would place her hands in hers. When blood accumulated in her eyes, she spoke. "I searched because I needed to meet you. My name is Cassandra too, you were named after me and I am your grandmother."

The old woman's mouth was wide open having no idea how to respond to the situation. Both women stood there staring at each other with bulging eyes for several minutes. With great care, the old lady backed up a few steps.

"Cassandra Trelawney..." Cassie whispered, "I don't believe you."

The young woman by appearance clasped her hands together, "Then give me a chance to convince you."

The two women slowly made their way into the sitting room and the vampire began thoroughly explaining her past, her background and how she came to realise she had family – through the acquaintance of a Hogwarts student that remained unnamed. She mentioned Sybil and Cassie smiled happy that her brother and his wife found a child at last.

Cassandra narrated her story, until well into the evening. Her granddaughter then began regaling her with tales of her childhood with specific memories involving her father. Cassandra felt the blood falling from her eyes as she heard stories upon stories about the

wisdom of her son how he was an able Runes' Master yet a family man, a strict Head of House but a doting husband and father nonetheless.

When it seemed like Cassie had exhausted her tales, she went into her room and retrieved several photo albums. Cassandra felt that the deep ache that had pulsed within her soul since a century began to dull. When she learnt of her son's life from Sybil and how he had had a family, she was elated. In those hours with her granddaughter, when she saw pictures, heard memories, and heart-felt stories, she knew that her son had lived a full life with laughter and a family. It meant the world to her to know that her son was indeed a happy man with a great life. Even though she would never get to know him, she would see his teachings, his successes, and his behaviour in his daughter.

She traced her hand over a particularly old photograph of her son when he was in his late teens. He stood in front of his new house in Chestershire where he and his bride would spend several happy years and raise two children. With his arms crossed over his chest, he was smiling genially, looking young, healthy, and handsome.

"He looks so much like my father." She mused.

Cassie chose not to comment.

Soon all was said and done. The albums were put away and the tea set was returned to its place. The old woman prepared dinner for herself and her grandmother watched her eat, being unable to ingest human food herself.

"Well, perhaps you could tell me about you, Cassie." She said lightly.

Although it had been an emotionally draining day she was still curious about her granddaughter's seemingly mysterious life. Cassie stopped eating and looked at her questioningly, "I have had a relatively simple life Cassandra."

Cassandra tilted her head to one side with a smirk on her face. "Well Cassie, the reason I am curious is because there are so many questions about you and the things you have done in your 'relatively simple' life. Married to Arcturas Black? Working for the Department

of Mysteries? Romancing in Munich? And now finding you here, living as a muggle in Nice?"

Cassie chewed her food and swallowed before she leaned back in her chair. She seemed to observe the roof of her home in wonder, as her mind drifted back to memories of a time long gone.

"Arcturas was a vile piece of living flesh, that I refuse to call human. He disgusted me, in all senses of the word." She shivered, "I spent as much time away from him as I could. Working for the Department was my only escape, and I took full advantage of it. When war broke out and they offered me a position in Munich as a spy I left without a second thought."

The vampire was slightly taken aback by the old woman's hatred for the man who for all intents and purposes, was supposedly madly in love with her. "I thought he loved you? Or at least that is the rumour." She mentioned.

Cassie shook her head ruefully, "Oh he loved me for sure. It's the only reason I survived as long as I did when married to him. But that did not lessen his depravity, his mental sickness. If it's all the same to you I rather not revisit those memories."

She was surprised but hid it well "I see..."

The old woman continued, "In Munich, I met Philip. Initially, he was just what we in the Department called a checker. If I were ever to be caught while working undercover, he would rise to be my background check for being in the area at the time. But then... I fell in love with him." She smiled happily at the memory of the good old days, and Cassandra inclined her head politely, "He would hold me tight and never let go. He was a good man. A little dull, but an honest man nonetheless. He never doubted me, never second-guessed when I went in with other patrons of the pub to question them. He took my word at face value and trusted me. It was the most difficult decision of my life leaving him, but I had to."

"Why?" She asked when she saw the hardened expression on her granddaughter's face.

"Being an Agent for the Department of Mysteries I had signed a contract. What we do during missions is sometimes reprehensible

though necessary. We pledge to do all that we have to for success, but never repeat it. I could not search him out. I could not run to tell him the truth because the contract would kill me for breaking it. I was so angry that I forsake the Department and gave up magic as a result. I haven't used a wand in fifty years. I left Arcturas and Britain behind and came here to Nice to wait for Philip to come looking for me." Cassie cleared her throat as if uncomfortable with the turn of the conversation. She proceeded in a softer tone of voice while she looked away from the vampire, "I waited for fifty years and he never came." She turned back to her grandmother with black humour evident in her eyes, "That's my story Cassandra. I was one of the most formidable witches of the age and I gave up my witchcraft for the love of a man who forgot me as soon as I was out of sight."

Cassandra's heart reached out for her needless pain because Philip indeed loved her back! She was about to tell her that she would get him there for her.

BEAT!

A strong tendril of magic assaulted the vampire's mind. Her eyes became glassy, she felt her subconscious was trying to tell her something. It was Divination. It was the miracle of the Sight. In her mind's eye she saw the room she was in, the dinning room of her granddaughter. She saw Cassie call out her name in concern, and then her granddaughter was burning a bright red.

Fire... Hate... Deceit... Lies...

The words resonated over and over again in her mind. She could not look or think past them. A fire, a voice, a scream jolted Cassandra and commanded her not to believe, not to trust. Something was wrong, the story she heard and the life described was amiss. Like freight train, her senses returned to normalcy in sudden crash. She considered her granddaughter with a creased brow, her lips pursed, and her mind ran a mile a minute. Her hand fisted around her wand tightly.

"You tell an interesting story, Cassie," she whispered, "but for some reason, I just don't believe you!" Quick as lightning, she withdrew her wand and a silent stunner was shot at her granddaughter.

The two women faced each other across a small dinning table. Cassie didn't have a wand and she hadn't used magic in five decades. The result should have been obvious. Yet nothing happened as expected.

Cassie jumped out of her seat and her body twirled in the air. She did a somersault and landed lightly on her feet. A feat that was completely impossible for an eighty-year old woman who hadn't used magic in five decades. The stunner hit the chair, recently vacated, harmlessly. With nary a word spoken, a wand emerged in the old witch's hand from thin air and she began to fling curses at Cassandra in rapid-fire sequence.

The vampire jumped to the side of the table as the curses began to impact the surrounding area. She used her vampiric speed to push the dinning table forwards in a millisecond and huddle behind it as a shield. She obscured herself as she considered her plan of action, to somehow incapacitate the old witch and learn the truth without causing her harm. The wood of the table surface began to rupture and break apart under the onslaught of curses hurled at her. She slid from behind the table as a blasting hex tore it to pieces and threw debris in all directions. There was a momentary distraction caused by the flying pieces of broken furniture, Cassandra seized the opportunity to let off a Befuddlement Jinx and a SmokeBall effect Curse that shrouded the kitchen in a dense fog.

She disappeared with an almost inaudible crack and reappeared in the centre of the Salon beyond the kitchen. Cassie was in her line of sight and she fired off a stunner to end the duel quickly. In the last possible moment, the old witch turned around surprisingly rapidly and raised a shield that easily held off the red curse. Cassie abandoned her efforts to dissipate the fog in her kitchen and began to walk towards the Salon with confident strides. Cassandra threw several more lethal curses at her, but she blocked them without batting an eye. Never once was her pace slackened due to the vampire's attack.

Cassandra breathed deeply at that point. Her wand moved in quick succession and began to transfigure the furniture in the living room. The nearby sofa was morphed into a triad of lions, the black recliner became a menacing black jaguar, and the ceiling bulbs turned into vicious hawks.

As Cassie emerged, her wand already flinging curses, the vampire yelled, "Oppugno!"

The lions, jaguar, and hawks targeted Cassie and ran or flew towards her to attack. Rather than appear worried, the old witch seemed completely relaxed. With practiced ease borne out of years of training, she cocked her head to one side and let loose four piercing hexes. In speedy succession, four arrows were conjured and pitched at the attacking cats. The first arrow went into a lion's mouth and pierced its innards. It surfaced from the other end covered in bits of gore and blood. The other lions were equally unlucky as arrows sliced through their foreheads, they died after taking a few more steps, and bloodied arrows protruded from the back of their heads. The jaguar managed to avoid the arrow by jumping above it and missing it entirely. The witch merely raised an eyebrow at that and loudly incanted a spell.

"Confringo!"

The colourless blasting hex was thrown onto the ground of the Salon and it threw pieces of marble upwards. The jaguar was summarily hit with several such pieces, enough to slow its attack. Cassie used the opportunity to kill it with another blasting hex that tore the black cat apart, its entrails spread into the previously immaculate Salon.

One of the hawks managed to nip into her shoulder and she clicked her tongue in irritation. With a deft jab of her wand, she conjured a selection of falcons, vultures, and hawks that engaged her remaining attackers.

The vampire decided to take advantage of the witch's distraction and solidified her assault plan. She further transfigured several other pieces of furniture into wolves that were put under severe compulsion charms to attack the old woman. The wolves dispatched, Cassandra raised her wand began to chant under her breath. She was at her wit's end and she had only one more idea to subdue her opponent without causing grievous bodily harm.

The oncoming wolves exasperated Cassie and she lazily got rid of them with three well-aimed piercing hexes through their mouths. More gore accompanied the already present amounts in decorating her Salon. The smell of death began to permeate the air as the felled transfigured animals rotted at an alarming pace. The angered

granddaughter created a bubblehead charm around her head and the room came into focus with greater ease. She was extremely chagrined when she saw six vampires span the room with wands pointed at her.

The sextet of vampires caused her to click her tongue again. "You're annoying me." The old witch said tonelessly. Her wand pointed straight ahead, Cassie twirled on the spot into a semi-circle with a summoning charm on her lips. A huge barrage of debris, including the broken furniture, entrails, and remnants from the dead animals, was raised.

Cassandra saw the debris mesh into one, large, monster-like form. Her eyes were wide in horror as she chanted at a faster pace to keep her illusion running while simultaneously she conjured a shield. The old witch who was controlling the shocking amount of waste smiled malevolently and flung it all at the six vampires.

There was a loud bang sound as the debris met its target in the form of the vampire's shield. Forced to allow her illusion to drop, Cassandra held onto her wand with both hands and channelled every ounce of her energy into stopping the debris that was reaching her. Just as suddenly as the attacking wreckage came, the force that was propelling it wavered and ended. The debris dropped onto the floor and Cassandra searched the room cautiously for her unrelenting attacker.

"Boo!"

The vampire turned immediately with an incapacitation curse ready to be let off. THWACK! She was stopped short when a large wooden stake was thrust into her chest.

Cassie looked on dispassionately as her grandmother crumpled to the floor. The holy cross was protruding from her heart, as she lay there with her eyes wide open in shock. The witch sniffed in disapproval and without a backwards glance she left the Salon. Beyond a door that had been partially blasted off its hinges at some point during the attack, Cassie entered the Main Foyer where a portrait of a young-looking girl in a long, silvery gown regarded her with narrow eyes. Apparently it was magical.

"What do you mean they're not there?" Cassie yelled, "I told you to keep watch!"

The woman in the portrait huffed with her arms on her waist, "Keep talking to me like that and I won't help you."

She gritted her teeth in chagrin, "You little—"

Her words were cut short as she staggered to support herself on the desk below the portrait. Black spots dominated her vision and her head swirled. With a garbled curse, she fell to the floor unconscious.

Right behind her stood Cassandra the Vampire with her wand drawn and the smoke of the stunner was billowing from her wand tip. A wooden stake obtruded her undead heart. She lowered her wand and put both hands on the stake. With great effort and a loud, shrieked oath she pulled it out. She was winded as she threw away the weapon that was meant to kill her. With a loud clatter the wooden death trap coated in her blood fell on the ground.

With deft jabs and swirls of her wand, she raised the unconscious form of Cassie Trelawney and bound her to a hastily conjured chair. She relieved her of her wand and her three back-up wands, Cassandra looked at the old woman with a renewed sense of respect and curiosity. She wasn't entirely certain on how she should proceed. The events of the day had been staggering as she was thoroughly blindsided by her granddaughter.

She waved her wand and incanted, "Ennervate!"

With a loud groan, old Cassie came to the world. Her beady, amber eyes observed and took in her surroundings until they fell upon her captor. She coughed, "Didn't I just kill you, Grandmother?"

Cassandra cocked an eyebrow dramatically, "I am now indebted to the vampire who perpetuated the rumour that wooden stakes can kill us." Her tone was dripping with facetiousness.

She conjured another armchair which appeared much more plush and comfortable than the one her granddaughter sat on. With an unnecessarily long sigh, Cassandra took her seat and relaxed on the cushions. Her eyes were closed as if she was sleeping, her arms

lay limply on the armrests, and her legs were stretched outwards. She mirrored the image of ultimate leisure.

"How about the truth this time?" She prompted with her half-lidded eyes.

The old witch sighed and pretended to mull the question over with a thoughtful frown, "How about? No."

The vampire smiled predatorily, not moving an inch from her position, "You are so much like me, Cassie, that it is rather frightening."

She walked towards the old woman and grabbed her chin between her thumb and forefinger. She proceeded to pry her mouth open though the old woman did put up some resistance. A potion vial was hidden within her robes and she retrieved it. She daintily waved the colourless liquid encased in the glass vial to and fro in front of the witch's face before she uncorked it and stuffed the contents down Cassie's throat until it was all swallowed. Cassie tried to fight the effects of the potion, but soon her eyes glazed over as the telltale sign that the Veritaserum had taken effect.

"What is your full name?" The vampire asked the question almost robotically.

"Cassandra Agnes Trelawney." She responded in a monotone.

Cassandra knew the potion had taken hold and the woman in front of her was completely at her mercy, compelled to tell the truth. Her body was held rigidly as she tried to resist the effects but it was a futile effort.

"Are you my granddaughter?"

"Yes."

That one word was enough to shake her. Cassandra held onto the back of the chair Cassie was sitting on to regain her balance and sort through her thoughts that were jarred by that revelation. She was holding out the hope that this was some polyjuiced impostor. She was praying that her real granddaughter was tied up somewhere and kept away from her.

"Why did you attack me?"

"You were about to learn the truth about me, I had not anticipated that. You would have been a liability so I had to get rid of you." Was the stiff response from the bound captive.

"A liability for what?" Cassandra prodded.

"A liability to my children."

That stopped her dead in her tracks. She stood stock still like a statue as her pallid complexion turned paler at the implications of that reality. Nowhere, had she ever heard or read or possibly known that Cassie Trelawney had children. Maybe... Maybe they were the children of Philip Schmidt? She took a quick breath and composed herself upon remembering that the Veritaserum would soon begin to fade away. She took a few shaky steps backwards, not letting her eyes wander from her granddaughter, and retook her original seat on her armchair.

"Why did you lie about giving up magic?" She asked, unwilling to deal with the other shocking revelation as of yet.

"That was part of my cover story."

Her cover story? But how, what, WHY? The vampire's thoughts were running a mile a minute as she contemplated her granddaughter's actions.

"Do you love Philip Schmidt? Is all that you told me true?" Cassandra asked as she leaned forward in her chair.

"No, I used him during the war and went back and modified his memories so he could lead you to me." She answered.

"Did you know of me? That I was coming to find you?" She asked with a stern expression.

"Yes and yes."

It had been more than five minutes and the Veritaserum would soon wear off. She possibly had the time for one last question.

"How?" Was all she managed to articulate.

"I Saw you." Cassie answered back.

The glazed look vanished from the old woman's eyes. She viciously spat at the stunned expression on her grandmother's face. Her hands were straining against the bonds that held her to her chair and silent tears were falling from her eyes.

"I hate you!" She said vehemently, "Its all your fault! I inherited this...this curse from you! My daughter died because of you!"

It was an understatement to say that Cassandra was stunned. "But-but it doesn't make sense. The Seer genes should have been cancelled out by the Oracle ones, nothing should have manifested!"

"Look at me Grandma!" Cassie yelled, "I am ruined because I See the future. I loved Arcturas with all my heart and soul and I had to leave him because of this blasted Sight!"

Visibly recoiled from the distraught woman. The vampire was at a loss. "But I never intended this Cassie, it is not my fault."

"Oh, yes, it is!" She exclaimed, "It is the curse of the vampire. Your curse thrust upon my family!"

Cassandra was distressed. She clutched her hands together and knotted her fingers as her thoughts ran at a furious pace. Never before had she paid any mind to the curse, because she never knew it to have affected her own family, as she believed she had none. The curse of the vampire affected any living family of the turned mortal. It granted them immense bad luck which depended on the extent they inherited traits or were similar in any manner to the mortal who was turned.

"Tell me the truth, Cassie." She said in a soft voice. "All of it."

Tears fell unbidden from the old witch's eyes and she held a grim expression. Cassandra waved away her bonds and freed her. They sat in silence for a long time as Cassie composed herself. When prepared the old woman started in a low tone.

"I work for the Department of Mysteries as Agent Black, one of the leading supervisors. In 1943, I was pregnant, but the Sight let me know that my child, my daughter, was destined to be a squib."

Cassandra interrupted. "But Arcturas Black was the first wizard to be diagnosed with Inermia."

She shook her head lightly. "He had a mild form of it. It made it difficult to have children, but not impossible. When I found out that my little baby was to be a squib, I knew Arcturas would separate us from her. He wouldn't have the heart to kill her, but he would send her away into the muggle world. So I disappeared for a year-and-a-half. I came here, to Nice, where I gave birth to her. My little Celia was a beautiful baby."

She smiled in warm remembrance as the old memories came to her, "I went back to England soon after and divorced Arcturas. It was in reality the most difficult and cruellest decision of my life. After that I did a brief stint as a spy in Munich where I was with Philip Schmidt. He fell in love with me and I let him, but I never felt anything for that simple man beyond pity. When my work there was over, I came rushing back to Nice and my daughter." Her eyes hardened and her lips became a thin line. "We lived, just the two of us, for many years. At the age of seven, she manifested the Sight."

Cassandra gasped at the revelation. "But that's impossible! She was a squib, the Sight should never have—"

"And yet it did," Cassie interrupted her, "Without the magic to control it, to send the tide back of her subconscious, my Celia was helpless. I could not teach her Occlumency to shield her mind. I could not teach her any technique whatsoever to protect her. The Sight consumed her." She paused and gathered herself to continue, "By the age of ten, she went mad."

Cassandra covered her mouth in horror. It was not all that rare for a Seer to grow mad with constant visions. If they were not taught to control it, it was a virtual certainty that sooner or later, the Sight would consume them.

"Despite the harshness of the life given to us. Despite being alone, I still took care of her to the best of my ability, but she kept running away from home." Cassie sighed, her weariness was evident, "The

Sight would urge her to break free and harm her until she followed through. There were so many long nights of screams and utter pain as she was tortured by her own mind. She would hurt herself, bang her frail little body against the wall, and crush her fingers by slamming close the door on them. She nearly scratched out one of her eyes to stop the visions. It was...terrible to witness." Cassie needed to pause as she wiped her face. "When she was thirteen she disappeared and I could not find her. I believe the Sight had totally consumed her mind at that point. My Celia had succumbed to the powerful might of her subconscious. Unless her subconscious wanted her to be found, she wouldn't be. Nine months later, she turned up at my doorstep with child." The witch paused as her lips trembled, "She was pregnant. My fourteen-year-old daughter was pregnant!"

She shook her head. "It wasn't long before the baby was born. Celia was catatonic for most of those days that she stayed with me. A living corpse, she was. The night the baby was born, Celia smiled for the first time in many years as she held her son. As I sat beside her, I knew her subconscious had relinquished its claim upon her. My little baby girl was with me again. It was at that moment that I realised that my Celia was not supposed to have a fulfilling life, my Celia was a being meant to exist in torment, to be used by Fate for Her own means. She was a child that should have never been born and yet she was, defying all odds. The last words she ever said to me before she passed away holding her son for the first and last time were Je t'aime Maman, je suis libéré finalement... Her purpose for existence fulfilled."

The vampire's eyes were downcast as she replayed those words in her mind: I love you Mum, I am finally free...

"Now you know..." Cassie said as she choked up, "So please leave me and what's left of my family alone!" She stood up and indicated the door before she headed towards the portrait she was conferring with before having been attacked.

The portrait-woman looked at her sadly and didn't argue with her, "They left the house days ago," the portrait-woman reported, "They were going on a trip."

Cassie only growled in response.

"Please don't send me away..." The vampire whispered with clear desperation from her spot on her armchair. Her granddaughter looked at her with surprise. Cassandra was tearing up, "My entire existence, I have wanted a family. You are my family Cassie, your grandson is my family. Please, let me try to make amends for the curse put upon you because of me."

The old witch looked away in anger, "I had a vision of you last year," she said in an angry tone, "When I found out that it was because of your curse that this happened to me and my little Celia, a part of me hated you and will always hate you. You have no idea how long I blamed myself for what happened to her."

The vampire fell from her conjured chair to her knees, her arms clasped in a position of begging, "This is all I have to exist for Cassie. Please, please let me be a part of your family. Its all I have..."

The witch was slightly unnerved by the vampire's plea, but then her eyes glazed over. Cassandra knew that look – she was having a vision.

When she returned to her senses, she looked at the creature pityingly, "We'll try, it will take time, but time can heal all wounds. I don't guarantee it will work and I don't guarantee that I will be able to forgive you. I've just had a vision," she said with a small smile, "My grandson is here with his wife, they will be arriving soon."

Cassandra stood up and her eyes were wide with surprise, "T-Thank you Cassie."

"Don't thank me yet, we have a lot of rage to work through before you can thank me. Also there is the distinct possibility that in a fit of said rage I might just kill you permanently. I tend not to make the same mistake twice. Now let's get this place cleaned up!" The old witch and older vampire made quick work of the ruined hall and kitchen, it took about half an hour, but soon they were seated on the comfortable blue sofa as before.

"There are some basic facts you need to be aware of before you meet my grandson," Cassie warned her, "he does not know I am a witch, although I presume he does know of the existence of magic. He is a squib and I left my past a secret because I wanted to spare him the pain of our world. He lives in England with his wife and

daughter. I'm certain that my great-granddaughter has indeed manifested magic because last I checked on her, she was enrolled on the Hogwarts register. Also they live with a different name, his father's name."

Cassandra's eyes were wide, "Why does he have the name of a man who bedded a thirteen-year-old girl?"

She sighed, "Celia was the one to blame. Poor Léon had no idea what was happening, he was just a fourteen-year-old muggle that was compelled for whatever reason by the demented Sight that consumed my daughter. My grandson took his name when he first sought out his father and was welcomed with open arms into Léon's family."

Her vampire hearing picked up the squelching of a car on the sand outside, "I think they're here Cassie."

She nodded along and the door was soon thrown open to let a tall man march through. "It's ME Grand-maman!" He called out in French.

His bright blue eyes took in the sight of his smiling grandmother and then the attractive young woman that sat beside her. He looked embarrassed that Cassandra saw his less-than-adult-like behaviour and he apologised instinctively. As Cassie greeted him and his wife, the vampire had her first full-look of her great great grandson. He was very tall, had wide shoulders, and a dusting of brown hair with a few greys. He wore spectacles and he had bright blue eyes. His looks did not spark a striking similarity to her family like Cassie did. But in his wide, pearly half-smile and high cheekbones, she could see her own father.

His wife was a delicate thing, petite on all accounts with long brown hair and a sharp gaze of inquisitive brown eyes that assessed her curiously. She appeared much younger than her husband as well. She smiled warmly at Cassie and greeted her in garbled French and a quick kiss on each cheek.

"Where are my manners?" Cassie fussed after kissing her grandson on his cheek.

"Children," she said looking at the couple, "I want you to meet Cassandra Trelawney, she's...lost family, visiting me."

"Cassandra," she said as she indicated her grandson to the vampire who was also observing the couple with a keen expression, "Meet my grandson and his lovely wife from England, Emmanuel and Elisabeth Granger."

That's my Bitch!

Beside the large throne that he considered his rightful place, Lord Voldemort stood and regarded the assembled Death Eaters with a familiar interest. They had been recuperating, all of them, for some time. He had saved twenty-two of his loyal followers from Azkaban prison. Only twenty remained.

Two had died by reneging.

He did not consider himself a merciful man by any stretch of the imagination. Below blood traitors were half bloods, below them were mudbloods, and finally muggles. However, the one creed in his social order that he considered more ignoble than the most lackadaisical of muggles were traitors. Traitors were a smear on wizardry.

During his first rise, he rarely faced the conundrum of dealing with them. His followers were either fanatically servile or intimidated and awed by his magical prowess. In simpler words, they knew better. Once a Death Eater, always a Death Eater. In the past month alone, two Death Eaters who had been serving life-sentences in Azkaban prison not only reneged from their venerable cause but also attempted to kill their Master.

Their deaths were drawn-out and painful.

Yet a question still begged to be answered. Where had this need for insurrection, this lack of trust in their Master that released them from their hellish prison come from? The Dark Lord narrowed his already slit-like red eyes in consternation as he considered his followers keenly.

"One more of our number has fallen due to traitorous designs." He said in a low voice but was entirely certain that it carried through to

every last one of them, "It is a sad day when a Death Eater loses sight of our noble cause and such vermin deserve extermination." He took a step forward and frowned at them with a levelled expression tempered with anger, "When one reneges, it is disappointing, when two do, it is a conspiracy."

Instinctively the gathered Death Eaters stiffened at his words. He smirked in satisfaction. "Tell me my most loyal of followers. You who braved through fourteen years in Azkaban prison lying in wait for your Master, you who were willingly incarcerated for our cause, you have the most to gain, and the most to prove to the wizarding world. Why is it then that it is you who choose to leave us? You who choose to attack your Master that saved you?" His voice was imploring.

Bellatrix leaned forward, her body beckoning towards him. She simply desired to touch him. "My Lord," she whispered, her lips were smacking in a languorous fashion. "Traitors deserve death, but we are your most loyal, we live for your word." Her eyes were wide and pleading, her body in a posture of servitude.

Voldemort weighed her words, "Is that so my dear Bella? Do you wish to please me? Do you and your fellow Death Eaters believe in our cause as much as you did before?"

"Yes My Lord! I pledge myself to you and only you!" She said, as she almost fell to her knees, so overcome she was by emotion.

He walked towards her until he stood before her hunched form. He ran a cold, bony hand across her cheek lovingly and she shivered in pleasure. "You are my most loyal Bella," he said running a hand through her hair, he petted her like a good dog. She purred as she revelled in his attention, ready to cry out in happiness.

Just as quickly as his affection came, it disappeared. He caught hold of her hair, bunched it into his fist, and yanked her up. She yelled at the sudden tug. Her limp body tensed as she was strung up. Her face now inches from his. "Then why this deceit?" He threw her down and she whimpered on the ground, she mewled like a spurned puppy. "Tell me Death Eaters, why this deceit?"

None dared to speak and he didn't expect them to. "Remember our cause Death Eaters, remember the mudblood filth infiltrating our

purest of blood, muddying us by their mere proximity, by their hated vices." He raised his hands in an impressive gesture to encompass them all. "Stealing our magic! Tainting our traditions! Forcing us to hide despite their inferiority!"

The Death Eaters shook from one foot to another, rearing to agree. "Remember Death Eaters how they steal our work and employment, our rightfully earned superiority! We are pure! We hail from the Old! We are the ones to be revered, to be served, we are the powerful!" His voice rose with each sentence.

He paused to take in all their faces as they looked upon him like the messiah he was. "We are wizards!" He roared.

"WE ARE!" One Death Eater called from the back, as he pumped his fist into the air. The others followed suit. It was a revel as they yelled and called their superiority. They asserted their brilliance and their traditions. They heralded the Golden Age of wizardry, they were all that was left of it and they demanded respect!

Voldemort raised a single pale hand for silence and the noise dissipated. The eager and excited faces of his followers gazed up at him. Such were the moments he lived for, the moments that cemented his glory. "Prepare yourselves Death Eaters, our time is nearing. We will soon attack and Britain is ours for the taking." He said.

Voldemort raised his left hand and snapped his fingers. The opposite opaque wall flickered and disappeared. What was left behind the disillusionment was a family of six muggles. Two obvious parents were stunned and bound, and four children ranging from the ages of six to sixteen. Another huge shout erupted in the crowds and the Death Eaters cheered their Master who promised them freedom from the muggle yoke.

"Let the festivities begin."

An indeterminable amount of time had elapsed when Voldemort exited the room with his inner circle in tow. The loud screams and shouts of the muggles were beginning to grate on his nerves. He enjoyed a good torturing but he was partial to finesse as compared to the bloody massacre and loud screaming that his underlings so preferred. Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrange, Rodolphus and

Romulus Lestrangle, Andrew Yaxley, Walden McNair, Adrian Avery, Alecko and Amycus Carrow and Antonin Dolohov followed him out.

He never looked back to make sure they followed because he knew they would. Of all his Death Eaters, they knew their places best.

He entered another room within Malfoy Manor. It was the conference room where he discussed plans and strategies with his Inner Circle. There was a long rectangular table in the centre of the room with another table at the back laden with scrumptious foods and drinks. Seating himself at the head of it, the Inner Circle took their respective seats at various appointed places.

All of them were flushed with excitement, their cheeks rose-tinted with the adrenaline and madness of their latest revel.

Voldemort inclined his head politely, as a small smirk played on his lips while he took in their appearances.

"I trust my friends you enjoyed the festivities as the others did?"

There was all around nodding and some hearty thumps on the table.

"Before moving onto business," he said, still feeling the adrenaline coursing through his veins. "I think we deserve a good show from a more respectable source."

His eyes flashed to Bellatrix who sensuously leaned against her chair. Her tongue darted out to wipe away the coppery blood on her lips from the muggles.

"Sweet Bella," he said as he lay back in his chair, his legs slightly apart and inviting, hands rested on the armrests, "Entertain us."

Bellatrix shivered in anticipation at being ordered by her Lord, she stood from her chair and began to sway her hips to an unheard rhythm as the surrounding wizards cheered her on. Years in Azkaban had taken their toll on her, but in the last month of convalescence, she had recovered through liberal usage of potions and charms, her original feminine curves and wily nature. The beauty of her features was remained marred not because of her incarceration, but due to her unleashed madness and hysteria.

She crawled along the wooden table and slowly she raised her robes. Various wizards touched her, but never did her eyes waver from the sight of her Lord. She pouted her lips as Carrow's hand ran up her thigh and stroked her moist centre.

Oh how she loved to be the entertainment of the Inner Circle at the revels.

She playfully batted his hand away and began to approach her Lord at a slightly faster pace. Her impatience to feel his touch, his benevolent heat against her overcame what little rationality she possessed.

She had reached the end of the table, her hands gripping the edge as she raised her heaving chest. Her face slowly moved towards the Dark Lord who merely smiled in lustful glee. She raised a finger and undid her bodice, allowing her ample breasts to pop out of their confinement.

"My Lord..." She said kissing him slowly, savouring the moment.

When he moved his lips away, he held her face gently and she shivered at the attention, "My Bella..." He sighed, "Pleasure me..."

She moved her body forward, until her midsection could easily bend down and her face was in her Master's lap. She nuzzled her nose against his clothed erection and then rubbed her lips up and down. He stroked her hair as she continued her ministrations.

WHAM!

Bellatrix felt herself being thrown off the table and onto the ground. Her half-naked body revealed for all to see.

"That's my wife!" She heard a familiar voice yell.

"Control yourself Rodolphus!" Voldemort said with more than a hint of anger.

"Exussum!"

"Avada Keda—AAAAAA!"

A strong, acrid smell of charcoal and burnt meat assaulted her senses. She stood up angrily and used her wand to cover her naked self. Absolute silence reigned in the room.

The Inner Circle stared in horrified fascination at the burnt husk of what used to be Rodolphus Lestrangle.

Voldemort lowered his wand steadily, his red eyes considering the latest traitor with fury.

"Leave." He whispered.

None argued, not even Bella who levitated the remains of her husband out of the room. She was the last to leave with the smoking remains in front of her. Nobody witnessed the few tears that spilt from her eyes.

The Dark Lord retook his seat, his good humour from the revel all but gone. He had just lost another Death Eater from Azkaban and this time it was an Inner Circle member to boot. Some mischief was afoot.

If there was one thing he had learnt from his thirteen years of roaming as a wraith, it was patience. Someone had definitely trifled with his Death Eaters while they were in Azkaban. He had hoped that with someone as foolish and Light-sided as Dumbledore in-charge, they would never resort to such measures. Apparently, there were some malcontents willing to cross a moral line whilst hidden in the dark.

He would reassess his Death Eaters and plan out his strategies accordingly. Wizarding Britain was doing a fine job denying its return that year, he would use the reprieve to sort his forces out.

He had planned on making an attempt on the prophecy within the week, but it seemed that that plan had to be postponed. Smiling evilly to himself, he knew exactly who would be perfect for his... experimentation.

Multiplicity of Roles

In a large, rounded room, he watched her progression up to the center of the dais. His eyes trailed her long, ceremonial robes as

they dragged along on the ground. She was a tall woman, her shoulders wide and her chin held with a slight upturn that characterised pride and accomplishment. A monocle magnified her left eye and her intense blue gaze pierced the silent assembly. Finally, she reached the centre, her frame shifted to face each and every person that regarded her with varied emotions tightly veiled behind masks of carefully cultivated disinterest. He would know after all, he was wearing a similar mask, except his was tempered with a sense of aloofness and genuine happiness.

Madame Amelia Bones opened her mouth and without the aid of a sonorous charm, her booming voice reverberated through the hallowed chambers of the Wizengamot.

"Members of the esteemed Wizengamot, it gives me great pleasure to stand in front of you this evening." Her stance never shifted, her eyes never wavered, but the assembly suddenly sat up straighter on being referred to. She held up her fisted hands and continued, "I stand today in my new capacity as Acting Minister of Magic." There was a polite applause when she made that announcement, "Thank you. The late Cornelius Fudge was a man of many qualities," even though he was sitting several rows away from the Madame, the scorn in her tone was palpable, "his death has cast a dark shadow over Britain. Until a new Minister is selected formally in the summer session, I shall ably perform in his stead. At such time, the Head of the Auror Office, Sir Rufus Scrimgeour shall take upon himself the task of managing the Department of Magical Law Enforcement." A dishevelled man, with a rugged appearance, and a noticeable limp in his right foot stood when his name was announced. There were several whispers but per functionary applause greeted the news.

Without having missed a beat, the new Minister went on, "There has been great upheaval and controversy recently pertaining to the claims made by certain individuals regarding the possible rebirth of the erstwhile Dark Lord, You-Know-Who." Dead silence met this new message, "While the late Minister Fudge chose to ignore these calls to arms, as new Minister, it would be prudent to investigate these claims to their fullest as part of the ongoing investigation jointly undertaken by the Auror Office and the Department of Mysteries pertaining to the attack in the Ministry that led to the sad occasion that befell us a little while ago."

The silence was deafening as none could think of an appropriate response. He smiled to himself as he saw her confident pose when she directed the Wizengamot. Unlike her predecessor, Madame Bones was direct and clipped, and not easily gilded with a silver tongue and moneyed pockets. She would ensure justice in its true form as best as she could manage.

"Point of Information." Came a drawn-out silky request from the tenth row. Clad in the finest robes known to wizardkind, a man with long, blonde hair and a well gripped silver cane stood in his seat.

Although his attention was drawn to the new Minister, he was forced to observe the speaker, the leader of the Traditionalists, Lucius Malfoy. He nodded in the direction of the blonde before he turned to the Madame who seemed resigned to the inquisition, "Would the esteemed Minister open herself up to points of information from the Assembly as they pertain to the matter she has thus disclosed?"

Her eyes snapped to him and she smiled, almost predatorily, and he couldn't help but feel a show was in order. "Any and all Chief Warlock," she acquiesced.

He considered the standing member once more, "Rising Member Lucius Malfoy, you have the floor." His part completed, he sat down and watched the proceedings with interest.

The blond man held himself with a grace that only the elite could master. His eyes considered the new Minister with an unmistakable hunger, "First of all, heartiest congratulations Minister Bones for your new position." She nodded in acknowledgement and he went on, not even bothered to wait, "However, I find myself...vexed," he paused for effect, his hand stroked the serpentine head of his cane, "The venerable late Minister Fudge had assured the Wizengamot and the Wizarding Public at large of the veracity of the claims made by one Albus Dumbledore and Harry Potter. Why is it the Acting Minister considers it wise to waste precious Ministry resources into such obvious nonsense based on the hearsay of a man lost to senility and an attention-seeking boy?"

There were murmurs of agreement and he was ready to scowl at the little bastard, but held his calm, this wasn't his battle to fight. The Acting Minister for her part was not ruffled in the slightest.

"A keen observation, Rising Member Malfoy, one worthy of note. While it is undeniable that the late Minister had his reasons beyond the testament to common sense that a dead man could not rise again. Recent events have created...doubt." She paused as the murmurs ceased to digest the words just thrown at them. "Death Eater activity has been rising, the Auror Office is being inundated with worried wizardfolk's owls on the growing dangers that has even spread to Diagon Alley, and finally, as a fighter in the First War in the front ranks, I have become intimately aware of the subversive tactics of Death Eaters. The assassination of the late Minister is very reminiscent of their ways of action, in fact it was almost identical to the second attempt on Minister Bagnold's life while she was in office during the war." He could see how her words were worrying the Wizengamot but Lucius looked ready to scoff at her, so she ploughed on. "We fear the rise of some sinister evil. It is in the interest of the Ministry to consider all possible courses, however remote, in its pursuance of justice and maintenance of peace. After all Rising Member, it is simply an investigation, whatever so yields from it will be presented to the Wizengamot in due course."

With that, the matter was settled. Everyone could question and debate a new proposal or bill or decision or ordinance, it was beyond the powers of the Wizengamot however, to control the manner in which the Head of the Armed Forces decided to exercise her jurisdiction, so long as it did not infringe the sanctity of the Chambers. This use of power clearly did not.

"If that is all Rising Member Malfoy," he said fluidly, "would you yield the floor back to the Chief Warlock?"

Malfoy flicked his hair back, his hand ran through the locks slowly, and he barely hid his sneer. "Of course Chief Warlock, the floor is so yielded."

"Madame, you are free to continue with your report." He said to her and she went on seamlessly.

The rest of the Wizengamot session droned on as normally as usual. Business was debated, proposals were put forward, and shot down. Old Member Smith and Rising Member Malfoy contended against one another once again when the committee considered the Acting Minister's budgetary suggestions. Soon enough, the session ended and the wizards and witches shuffled out.

He held back because he knew he was required to. The Acting Minister Bones approached him when the Chambers were left with a few stragglers still arguing some point or another.

"Chief Warlock Wigglesworth," Madame Bones said in a softer voice, very unlike her usual veneer, "I must thank you for your tacit support this evening during the proceedings."

A slight quirk of his lips was his only response. "I assure you Madame, I have no idea of what you speak. I was honest and forthright in my practice and ordering of the Assembly as always."

"Of course," she agreed with a slight smile, but her eyes never lost their severity, there was more that she had to say.

They stood while their eyes directly faced each other, their postures were rigid, tense, and unmoving, neither one was ready to back down first. "Is there something more you wish to discuss with me further Minister?"

"Indeed Chief Warlock Wigglesworth," she said, her decibel level fell, and her next words were a whisper meant only for him. "When I mentioned that I was a frontrunner in the First War, I did more than my usual duties in the Auror Office, as was customary at the time. I believe we have some – mutual friends, and I would be grateful if they chose to approach me in my new capacity to discuss these strange times." She paused, as if she were debating with herself to continue. Her muscles tensed a little further and that was the indication he needed to know that she indeed had something further to add, "I might see red if they do not."

He was shocked and he hid it terribly. Her piece said, the Acting Minister turned away from him and began to walk away, her Auror personnel crowded around her. "Good evening to you Chief Warlock." She said with her usual boom as she exited the Chambers.

It took him a few seconds to recompose himself. When he felt he had gathered his bearings, he quickly left the Chambers too. His feet carried him as fast as he would let them. He smiled and greeted the familiar faces he passed on his way to the lifts. With a quick press, he got off on the Main Foyer and went towards the Apparition Point.

Surrounded by several other wizards, he twirled his robes, and with a loud crack, disappeared.

He reappeared in a small, dark office. Wigglesworth pulled out his wand and muttered a few standard-obscuring charms and disguising spells. Then he muttered, "Lumos!" The dark room lit up with the light of his wand. It was almost decrepit in its layout, as if none had visited it in a long time. Barren, save for an old wooden table, two rickety chairs on either side of it, and the walls were covered in shadows and murk to the point that their original colour was undeterminable.

"Expecto Patronum!" A silvery-white hyena erupted from his wand-tip and headed out the door. The aging wizard went behind his unstable desk and settled himself in his uncomfortable chair. He then waited. It took a few minutes, but soon enough, there was a knock on his door.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Come in," he drawled out and the door opened with nary a sound. Clad in similar black robes with her face equally obscured and voice disfigured, was the leader of their department.

"I assumed an emergency upon being summoned in such a harried fashion, Agent White." she said in a clipped tone, her body held firmly as she entered the room, and took a seat opposite Wigglesworth.

He didn't say anything for some time. When he was ready, he spoke carefully. "Leader, during the attack in Chestershire back in '78, do you remember being part of the Mystery raid as we infiltrated alongside the Auror Corps?"

She shifted suddenly at the nature of the question posed, but nodded nonetheless, "How could I forget? We lost several formidable Agents that night."

"By 'lost,' you mean beyond just those lost to the Death Eaters, but also those lost even after the attack, who wanted to play a more central role in the war?" he asked.

She sat back in the chair and her hands gripped the aging metal sides with an unearthly strength, "Yes Agent White, why do you ask?"

He joined his hands, his face grave, but she couldn't see that, "Leader, how would you feel if you found out that the most powerful position in government, second only to you, was currently held by an ex-Agent?"

She didn't respond immediately, but the change in her posture as she beckoned slightly forward was all the response he needed. "I would be very intrigued. Is there more to the Acting Minister Bones than what meets the eye?"

Agent White placed a hand under his chin, he rested his head, and looked at her cautiously, "How much can you tell me of an Agent Red?"

The Leader froze in her seat, had her eyes been visible, they would have been as wide as saucers. "Oh dear..."

Somebody Cares

Stefan watched Harry work from the corner of his eye. It had been standard practice for him to do so ever since he employed Harry as his pseudo-apprentice and assistant. The boy was conscientious without a fault, but by all the curses of all the gods, he was a disaster in the Potions' Chambers. Whoever was his previous instructor had to have had a lot of patience, which he clearly didn't judging by the abysmal skills Harry possessed when they first met.

As Stefan stood in front of his cauldron, he watched the gentle fumes of the acid green potion rise in ringlets. It was a sign that the latest batch of the translation potion was a success. He noticed Harry was sitting across from him on the same table and he was slicing and dicing the powdered root of asphodel into an almost granular amount. His hands moved at a near inhuman pace back and forth on the skinned root, his bright green eyes solely focussed on his pressing task, and his body held upright with a frantic grace of some sort. Generally speaking, Harry was careful enough when it came to exact quantities and forms of ingredients for volatile potions, but as Stefan's eyes grazed over the fine, almost powder-like remains of a once gritty root, he knew that the unfortunate root was

yet another in a long line of victims that had fallen prey to his assistant's cold rage.

With an inaudible sigh, the young wizard finally finished his work. He appeared despondent that the root was no longer sliceable into tinier particles and that worried the Potions' Master. He continued to observe as Harry's eyes slowly but quickly scanned the area, they searched for something to do, something to destroy further. He didn't like the look he saw in those green eyes that once brimmed with guarded joy.

He cleared his throat uncomfortably, with a rapid shake of his shoulders, he snapped them in place, and his eyes were fixed firmly on his weathered dragon-hide boots. "Now Harry, I think we should talk about...you." he started off uncertainly and he could feel that cold, gem like eyes bore into his downcast head. "Perhaps if you tell me what is bothering you, I-I could help you move past it?"

Silence reigned in the Chambers. The only sound was the gentle bubbling and simmering of various cauldrons littered across the room. Harry had elected not to speak and in fact to elongate the discomforting quietness to hitherto inconceivable proportions in the humble opinion of the rattled Potions' Master.

"I'm fine Stefan, but thank you for asking." The young wizard responded in what Stefan had now characterised as his usual monotone.

He was going to let it go, if the boy was unwilling to talk about it with him then who was he to intrude? But something within the aged Potions' Master couldn't do that again. Whether he liked it or not, Harry was the closest he would ever come to having his own child in his long life.

"G-Give me a chance Harry, just...just try, even if to unload. All this brooding, well, more brooding than usual is just not healthy for you." he stuttered out.

More silence permeated the scented air and the old man managed to pluck up the courage to raise his eyes to the significantly shorter lad. What he saw unnerved him. The boy was young, barely into his fifteenth year, but his face, his expression, and his carefully cultivated nonchalance was unlike anything he'd seen before in a

child his age. For a mere fraction of a second, there was a crack in the boy's impenetrable stoic façade. If he hadn't been searching for it, he would have missed it entirely.

"What would I tell you?" Harry asked with a calm that preceded the storm, "What could I possibly tell you?" He took a dramatic pause, "How do you suggest I deal with the fact that I have a father, or some bastardised version of one, in an unhinged ex-convict on the run from the government? Or that everyday all I can think about is my best mate who is coping with the loss of his father, who died while performing a duty specifically intended to protect me in some way?" With every shocking proclamation, his voice rose higher, "Or that the one happiness that my mate has is in our best friend whom I too have some confused feelings for? Or even better! A crazed Dark Lord wants to hunt me down and kill me for something I did when I was a baby that I don't even remember?" He threw his hands up in the air in frustration and turned his back to the stupefied old man, "Where to begin? So many options, after all." His head was hung low and his hands shook as he fisted them to his sides.

A moment passed as Stefan attempted to digest the litany of complaints he had witnessed from an individual who shouldn't have had to deal with these consequences at such a tender age to begin with. His hands trembled as he wanted to reach out and comfort the lad, but his will failed him. He took a deep breath and steeled himself. He exerted some force to pull towards him the chair to his side and sat down upon it heavily. His weight felt much more cumbersome all of a sudden.

"Start from wherever you wish." Stefan assured without preamble.

Harry was still facing away from the old Potions' Master. His body was tense as he held himself together, no matter what he utterly refused to be broken down by his circumstances, dire as they were. Time ticked on slowly and he hadn't spoken a word, yet Stefan waited. Cautiously, the young wizard moved from his spot, his body rotated to expose his side to the old man. His right hand rested on the table between them and gripped it hard as he tried to gather himself.

"Stefan, I appreciate everything you're trying to do and are doing for me. But my life is something that cannot be fixed, least of all by whining about it." he sighed as he loosened his hold on the table.

His right hand fell limply to his side as he began to walk away from the Potions' Chambers. "Thank you Stefan, but I don't need help, I just need a little time." His words echoed in the room as he left through the front door that opened into the apothecary.

Stefan continued to sit in his seat and his expression was unreadable. When he heard the entrance to the apothecary open and close he knew that Harry had left. With a long-suffering sigh, the old wizard rested his hands, palm down, on the table beside his bubbling cauldron. He closed his eyes and held his face upwards, he had to centre himself lest he let loose his emotions and do something he might later regret.

The lad refused to air his concerns to him. Although the Potions' Master had prepared himself for such an eventuality, he had held out the hope that it wouldn't come to that. Wistful thinking in any case, as it turned out.

In years to come, he would always regret never having chased Harry down and convincing him to talk. For though he didn't realise it then, but that day was the last time he would ever get the opportunity to truly discuss anything with the boy he had come to consider his only connection to his lost offspring.

Complacency is a Vice

Focus Harry! Focus! He chanted in his mind as he swerved left and then right. His wand was held limply in his right hand and his spells were being fired at a measured pace.

"Stupefy!" He called out and a bright red beam of light headed towards his target.

Monica saw his attack and jumped out of the way neatly. She twirled on her toes much like a dancer and mid-turn, raised her wand hand and incanted, "Depulso!"

"Protego!" Harry called, he expected the banishing charm was intended for some physical object that would be hurled at him. He was mistaken. The banishment was meant just for him.

The invisible force of magical energy bypassed his shield and crashed into his torso. He felt the wind be knocked out of him as he

tumbled onto his back. With a loud BAM, Harry fell flat on the ground. His back ached as his legs and arms were in a spasm by the sudden battery. He groaned loudly as his head hit the floor as well.

"You know," Monica started as she approached his prone form, her wand pointed under her chin, "when you fall for the same trick twice, I have to begin to wonder if you're trying to lose."

She held out her hand for him to take and smiled. His lips were in a thin line, but he reached out his hand as well to clasp her outstretched one. Subsequently, she helped him regain his footing. She chuckled when he stumbled on being on his feet again. Her hand covered her mouth and she flicked her bangs back, her slight frame appeared to close in on itself as she attempted to hide her laughter.

"Thanks Monica." Harry said not entirely facetiously.

"Do not thank her Harry." Came a booming command from their side, "She's right in saying that you're not even trying. Monica used the same trick in your last duel and once again, you were beaten." Amanta approached him with her hands on her waist. "In general I would not hold it against you Harry, but this is such a trivial ploy, almost childish in its simplicity, and for you to fall prey to it repeatedly is an insult to me as your instructor."

Harry hung his head low at the chastisement. He couldn't dare to meet Amanta's disappointed gaze. She felt intimidating in all her five-foot glory.

"I'll try harder Amanta." He mumbled.

She threw her hands up in the air. Monica slowly backed away from the scene. She rightly sensed she had nothing worthwhile to contribute. "Try harder! Try harder he says." Amanta moaned, "Ever since you returned from England your skills and focus have been waning. This past week has been painful to witness as you've regressed to a level that is behind what you were even before I took you on." She pointed a finger at him, her anger was palpable, "Get it together Harry! Whatever is bothering you, whatever it is that you need to do, do it!"

"Yes Amanta." He acquiesced.

She shook her head and began to walk away. "There is nothing more for me to teach you today. Leave and we will 'try harder' tomorrow." She shot back at him without turning around. She disappeared into her garden and closed the door with a loud slam.

The two teens in the room stood stock still for a few minutes. Harry refused to look up, his eyes were staring fixedly on an invisible pattern on the ground in front of him. "I'll see you tomorrow Monica."

With that hasty goodbye, Harry retreated to the entrance of Amanta's house and made his exit in a rush. His mind was awash with Amanta's words. He couldn't stop thinking of what she said. He too had noticed that his skills had been deteriorating over the past few weeks. He was less and less focussed on his tasks and his thoughts were consumed by his concerns for his friends and...father. Gah! The very thought caused him to tingle all over, and not in a good way.

"Harry! Harry! Wait up!" Came a loud feminine voice from behind him.

He sighed, he knew exactly who it was and he was not interested in dealing with her right after his admonishment. It had also been a few weeks since Monica, Amanta's grandniece who was a Journeywoman Arithmancer, came to live with her. In the short time he'd known her, she'd helped him more than he could put into words. With Stefan he gained silence and time to contemplate. Amanta afforded him tutelage and knowledge unlike anything he'd experienced before. But Monica gave him a taste of normalcy. In the time he spent with her, she made him feel like any other fifteen-year-old boy, and not someone older with the burden of the world on his shoulders. But right then, after having been lambasted by Amanta in front of her, well, he really wasn't in the mood to face anyone.

A small hand curled on his shoulder and held on tight until he stopped his march away. He sighed loudly, his head still hung low. "I'm sorry Monica, I just don't want to talk about this."

She forced him to turn around and face her. Her dark black eyes were alight with concern and she scrunched up her button-like nose in annoyance, "I'm not asking you to talk to me about anything. You have troubles unlike anything I can imagine and I know that." She

squeezed his shoulder reassuringly, "But I think I can still help you with your very real problem when training. Bunica told me that she had big plans for you, but now, I don't think she's going to act on them if your performances are this abysmal."

His shoulders slumped and he felt his spectacles run down his nose. He closed his eyes and shook his head in denial, "I don't know what to do about it Monica. I just... I..."

She placed a finger under his chin and forced him to look up at her, "Sometimes, the solution isn't talking." She said, "Sometimes, what we need is just to get our emotions out and over with without any explanations or justifications." She was imploring him to understand with her widened eyes. "What emotions are making you lose control Harry?"

His mouth was agape, he didn't really know how to respond to such an honest inquisition, "I—I don't know...Confusion." He choked out.

"Why do you feel confused?" She prodded.

He shrugged, as he averted her gaze yet again, "I guess, I guess its because I feel betrayed and-and angry. So, so angry..."

"Angry enough to want to destroy something?" She asked and he nodded in the affirmative, "So angry that you feel you're going to lose control of your emotions and just— explode?" Again, he nodded. "And you have no idea what to do with this anger?"

"Yes." He agreed.

She smiled wide and placed her hands on her waist. "I think I have just the solution."

He observed her confident posture and mischievous eyes. For whatever reason, he was actually becoming excited. He grinned back at her, "Should I be worried?"

"Oh no!" She said while she gestured with her hands wildly, "Nothing at all to worry about. You should be relatively safe."

He cocked an eyebrow at her word choice, "Relatively?"

Bring it on!

Harry's head whipped from side-to-side in utter horror. This could not be happening to him! All around him were large levitated stands with hundreds of people seated in them. They were magically upheld in steadily widening concentric circles around the middle. Loud cheers were ringing out into the arena as the spectators were yelling and screaming at the top of their lungs. In the centre was a large, barren ground, with no markings and no items on it. It was a fighting ring.

Two wizards were facing each other off, wands in hand. One had a short red cape over his robes and the other had a similar blue one. He saw as Red shot a bone-breaker at Blue, which Blue blocked. Then Blue began to chant under his breath to raise the ground he was standing on. Cracks appeared in a roughly circular shape that penetrated into the ground. Red fired two silent curses in rapid succession in that time, which Harry couldn't recognise. The two curses were merely deflected off a translucent shield-like fortress Blue had magicked around him. Red was quickly losing his cool and he fired another spell whose incantation was drowned out by the crowd.

The vicious blue streak of magic cut through Blue's shield like it was butter. It seemed as if it was going to hit its mark straight on, but in the last second, the ground Blue was chanting to raise finally kicked in. A circular piece of the arena flew off the surface with Blue on top and he continued to recite his spell all the way. The crowd went wild when magic, twenty feet above the ground, held Blue. Loud catcalls dominated the scene as even Harry watched on in surprise, as he had never seen someone duel in that manner. Red was apparently none the wiser by the unexpected development, he pointed his wand upwards, and began to fire multicoloured spells with no discernible resistance posed by Blue. Tragically enough, it seemed the spell-fire could only go so far. At about five or six feet short of where Blue was situated, the spell seemed to dissipate or simply lose its effectiveness.

Harry was taken aback by the tactic. He had never thought of distancing himself from his opponent to the point that the spells couldn't even reach him. However, he wondered, how would Blue plan on making an attack if all his attention was focussed on keeping that piece of earth airborne. The match would go on forever.

Red, it seemed, also realised that fact. In a swift motion, Red lowered his wand and stared at Blue coolly. He placed the wand in both his hands and then sat down cross-legged on the ground, his eyes never left his opponent. The cheers receded as the crowd witnessed a most unusual development. Red and Blue were doing...nothing. It finally dawned on Harry that Red was simply going to out-wait Blue. It was such a brilliant plan because sooner or later, Blue would have to descend, as he couldn't attack while he was chanting to stay afloat.

ZAP!

Out of nowhere, a large streak of blinding white electricity erupted from Blue's body and was targeted at Red. Rubble and dust spread everywhere and the crowd was coughing violently as the zap impacted upon the ground. They looked on in interest, Harry with them, as the dust cleared.

There, in the centre, lay a blackened, bruised body. A half-shredded cape strewn to his left with a sharp, unmistakeable red colour. A moment passed as everyone digested what they just saw and then the audience began to roar!

"FINISH HIM! FINISH HIM! FINISH HIM!" The crowd was chanting and rearing Blue on. From high up, Blue began to lower himself to the ground amidst the wild calls from the spectators. His hands raised in jubilation for his victory.

"Stupefy!"

A shining beam of red magic appeared out of thin air and assaulted the unsuspecting victor. Harry saw the moment, when Blue's eyes widened in disbelief, as the spell crashed into his frame, and he fell over unconscious in defeat. Harry's eyes followed the trail of the spell just like the rest of the shocked crowd to the source. The source was apparently, the red cape, which was flying or floating a few feet above the ground.

"Finite Incantatem!"

In front of the stupefied assembly, Red reappeared, his red cape still tied to his back. He was covered in soot and dirt from head to toe,

but he was relatively unscathed. He pointed his wand to the blackened body that everyone assumed was him and undid his illusion. The body turned back into several large broken rocks and stones and settled onto the ground harmlessly.

The resultant response was unprecedented. Harry crazily reached out his hand and latched onto the short, pixie-like girl that had brought him there. Said girl was currently pumping her fists in the air, while she swore oaths and curses that could make a sailor blush. He pulled her close to him and began to drag her out. He had seen enough for one night.

"Harry! Wh-what are y-you doi—" She barely got a word out edgewise as she was pulled away from the stands towards the exit situated to the left.

"I've seen enough," he informed her in a loud voice so she could hear him over the crowd. "What is this place anyway?"

She tugged her hand, as she tried to break his grip, "The Official Bucharest Duelling Circuit. It's only just getting interesting!" She screamed over the audience.

"But I'd rather we leave now." He shot back.

He heard the announcer declare Red the winner and the crowd had a mixed reaction to the pronouncement. Suddenly, he felt Monica snatch her hand out of his grip and glare at him. "We can't leave yet! We still have to..." She yelled at him.

The announcer's voice rang out over the crowd, clearly enhanced by a sonorous charm. "WIZARDS AND WITCHES, OUR NEXT DUELLIST HAS BEEN IN THE CIRCUIT FOR FIVE ROUNDS SO FAR AND SHE REMAINS UNDEFEATED. PUT YOUR HANDS TOGETHER FOR WANDA WITCHY!"

The crowd started a rendition of "NEW BLOOD!" and that drowned out Monica's words completely.

"WHAT?" Harry yelled back but he couldn't even hear himself let alone her. He observed her mouth open and close, as she tried to indicate something of apparently great purport to him.

The announcer spoke again. "WE HAVE A FIRST-TIMER DUELLIST IN OUR MIDST TONIGHT! SOMEONE I AM GUARANTEED CAN LIVE THROUGH ANYTHING THROWN AT HIM. WIZARDS AND WITCHES, I BRING YOU JAMES BROODY!"

Monica's eyes widened and she grabbed wildly at Harry. With a loud crack a tall wizard in blue robes apparated right in front of them. He was looking at Harry, up and down, as if he was assessing him. His hands were crossed over his chest and he was chewing on something foul. For his part, Harry had never been more confused.

"This him Monica?" The announcer asked, his breathing heavy.

She nodded rapidly, "This is the guy I was telling you about Dan." She said, as her hand rested on Harry's shoulder. She leaned in to Harry's ear as he stared at her in absolute terror, "It's a great way to let go of your anger. And oh! Destroy that Wanda bitch for me, she killed me when I duelled her in her last round." She patted him on his back, slapped his arse for good measure, and he was unable to formulate words.

"Great, lets go Broody." Dan the announcer said as he clasped Harry's shoulder and side-along apparated him.

With a loud crack both Harry and Dan disappeared and Monica made her way back to her seat in the stands. Mentally, she prayed Harry wouldn't kill her for this when it was all over.

"SUCK IT WANDA!" She yelled with her fists high in the air.

How in the name of all that's holy did he end up in these situations? As soon as Harry had overcome his nausea at being apparated, he had just tried to explain to Dan the announcer that he did not want to fight when he was rudely informed that he had no choice in the matter. It was either fight 'Wanda Witchy' or the disappointed crowd who had paid good money to see him do so.

Within minutes, he was standing in the centre of the ground, a large blue cape on his back as he had seen before. Right opposite him, on the other side of the field, stood Wanda Witchy. She was tall, much taller than him in any case. Her hair was brownish and was close-cropped, very akin to Monica's hairstyle, but she didn't have

the cheekbones or femininity to carry the look like Monica did. At best, Wanda Witchy resembled a brutish man in ill-fitted clothes.

"Listen both of you," Dan said as he raised his wand, "I want a clean duel. No lethal spells, at least nothing that can't be reversed, no Unforgivable curses, and no spelling your opponent's private place. That one's for you Witchy." He said pointedly at her.

The...witch...pointed her wand at Harry and then indicated her neck. She slowly made the gesture of cutting his head off and then smiled predatorily. Harry gulped. His body was tense, but at the same time, the adrenaline had begun to course through his veins. He began to psyche himself to fight because if he was going to do this, he was bloody well going to win! He had faced a dragon, merpeople, acromantulas, sphinxes, and Lord Bloody Voldemort himself! That too was before he even met Amanta and all that she had taught him. Who was this ugly woman to intimidate him anyway?

"Conjure, transfigure, and enchant, the three golden steps to success." Harry repeated to himself what Amanta had drilled into his head.

Dan raised his wand and then yelled, "GO!"

Immediately, Wanda Witchy pressed for the advantage. Within seconds of Dan saying the word 'go,' an immitigable barrage of spells and curses came flying towards the surprised Hero. Caught off-guard, Harry reacted on instinct and jumped to the left. It seemed the spell-fire was trailing him. He moved at speeds he never deemed possible as he ran from one side to the next to avoid the terrible damage being hurled at him.

A few minutes into the running game and Harry realised he was making a fool of himself. Wanda Witchy was riling up the crowd, she was jeering and insulting him for not fighting. Loud choruses of "BOO!" echoed through the stands and Harry felt his cheeks had begun to redden in embarrassment.

Enough!

He pulled to his side and yelled, "Protego!" A translucent, slightly rounded, yellow shield appeared in front of him and began to adsorb Wanda's attack with relative ease. It then dawned on Harry that

most of her attacks were simple charms and jinxes, just to keep him on his feet.

He counted 'one,' in his head, and then jumped to the side. His shield fell in the process and Wanda was taken off-guard by his sudden movement. He immediately went on the offensive.

"Stupefy! Impedimenta! Stupefy! Stupefy!" The spells rained down on his opponent who blocked them with a protego shield. As the spells continued to impact her, Harry used her momentary distraction to begin his golden steps towards success.

He swished his wand left and right, which was standard for beginning a spell-chain for conjuration. Various baubles and odd little artefacts ranging from screwdrivers and bolts to rubber ducks and footballs appeared from thin air. The crowd watched his actions with interest and began to chuckle at his antics, but he didn't pay them any mind.

"Torrensia!" A violet, skin-burning curse was shot at him as he finished his conjuration.

Harry watched the violet light fly towards him with determined eyes. He snapped his wand to the side and began to chant under his breath. Three screwdrivers and a few bolts flew off the ground around him and crashed into each other, right in front of him. As Wanda's curse was close enough to make contact, the conjured artefacts were transfigured into a solid slab of granite that shielded Harry completely.

There was a loud "ooh," from the crowd at the impressive feat, but Harry now had to take the offensive and bring it home. He waved his wand in a practised, complicated pattern Amanta had forced him to memorise and perfect. The footballs scattered around him began to roll with his magical 'push.' He grabbed his wand with both hands and called out loudly, "Oppugno!"

The six footballs began to roll furiously. Their pristine white covers accumulated dirt as they made their way towards Wanda. Harry twirled his wand, called out some indiscernible words in Latin, and magic created a ferocious attack. The rolling footballs jerked off the ground and flew into the air. Their progress was towards Wanda.

The brutish witch seemed unruffled by their impending advance. She had started to fire a barrage of spells at Harry's granite enclosure, as she was trying to bring it down, and finish the match. Slowly but steadily, she was successfully chipping away the material and coming closer to the centre hidden within while Harry propelled the footballs.

In the last possible second, when the footballs were upon her, Wanda raised a light shield to deflect the physical attack they posed. Harry smiled at her reaction. He ran his wand in a perfect circle and jabbed through it, "Abeo Lupus!" He incanted, his non-wand hand raised in the air, poised to finish the special transfiguration he had been taught.

The footballs morphed midair. Their rounded surfaces expanded and formed shapes. What came down from the air were no longer a group of white footballs, but a pack of six white wolves. The wolves crashed into the surprised witch's shield and growled when they fell off. The six began to gnaw at her shield and their sudden appearance undoubtedly rattled her confidence. Wanda was focussing all her attention on the maintenance of her shield and Harry took advantage of the situation. He summoned the rubber ducks around him and morphed them together as he observed Wanda regain her resolve and begin to blast away the wolves.

The yellow ducks were fusing into one giant blob of white light as Harry chanted under his breath more rapidly than ever before. He revealed himself from behind his granite haven and pointed his wand at the blob, his eyes narrowed in intense concentration, and sweat dribbled down his face. He was biting his bottom lip in-between words out of sheer nervousness.

Amanta had once given him some indispensable advice. Subtlety was key, but sometimes, nothing was better than a good, old-fashioned pounding!

He channelled all his thoughts and emotions into the transfiguration cum animation Amanta had coached him in. Some specialty spells were doable when fuelled with emotion. The Patronus needed a happy memory, the Cruciatus called for the desire to cause pain and suffering. His spell needed anger and that he had in spades.

Flashes, images, and memories flew in his mind's eye as he recalled every single moment that threatened to make him snap at the time. Every forgotten birthday, Christmas, and Easter under the Dursleys' staircase, Mr. Weasley's funeral, Mrs. Weasley's tears, Dumbledore's secrets, and Sirius' lies. The voices and cheers of the crowd were drowned out. The world disappeared in a whirl of hate and white-hot rage. Just his magic and he remained. Finally the blob metamorphosed into what Harry wanted.

He smirked.

"Confringo!" Wanda said at last when the last white wolf was blown away from around her. She swept an eye over her wounded ankle, where one of the wolves had bitten her, but paid it no mind. It was pointless.

Thump. Thump. THUMP!

The witch's eyes turned forward in a second and widened like never before. A gigantic, enormous, yellow-coloured elephant was charging towards her, its trunk was raised as it emitted a loud sound. She stood dumbfounded, frozen in shock, as the elephant was inches away from her. Her disconnected mind was shut off and natural instincts took over, instincts that screamed at her to run!

She ducked to the side as the elephant charged ahead, she missed being trampled under its feet by a hair's breath. Her heartbeat was erratic and eyes wide when she heard the word that actually gave her cause for relief.

"Stupefy!"

A red light shot towards her and she considered her options. On one hand she could block it, on the other, she was on the ground, the deranged, off-colour elephant was almost upon her, and she had nowhere to run to fast enough this time.

She welcomed oblivion.

Harry slowly lowered his wand, his phoenix feather was vibrating within the wood and for the first time since he touched his wand at age eleven, he heard it sing to him. The audience was dead silent. It

seemed the utter impossibility of what they had just witnessed had not sunk in yet.

The yellow elephant roared. The crowd followed suit.

Dan apparated beside the tired young wizard. He approached him cautiously and when he was sure that he was not threatened in any way, he congratulated Harry. He grabbed the boy's hand and raised it in the air.

"OUR WINNER! JAMES BROODY!"

"...And the way she smiled, actually smiled in relief when she was hit by the stunner was priceless!" Monica said as she jumped along the sidewalk with Harry.

He grinned to himself. Even though he was still quite annoyed with the pixie-like witch for having dumped him in that unbelievable situation, he'd never felt lighter than he did then. He placed a hand on her shoulder to prevent her from skipping any further and made her turn to him.

"I want to ask you something." He said.

"Shoot." Her excited response.

"You knew I would win, that's why you put me in that place to begin with. How?" He was genuinely curious about it because the more he thought about it, the more it seemed like the only plausible explanation.

Her large, child-like grin reduced to a smaller one, one that appeared far too mature on her, "Honestly, I didn't know if you would win. But I do know you perform under pressure so I thought the situation would make you rise to the occasion, and it did!"

He placed his hands on his waist and stared at her in surprise, "So you mean I could have ended up worse off and you had no guarantee it would have worked?"

She shrugged, "Like I said to you when I met you, you win some, you lose some. But the real reason for putting you through that was not winning or losing, it was to make your emotions explode, and get

them out of your system. Duelling can be quite destructive, and simultaneously therapeutic, as you saw today."

He couldn't help it, her logic, however warped, had aided him in the end. "Thank you Monica."

"Don't mention it!" She squealed and then began to skip again only to stop short, "You do feel better about whatever it is that's bothering you, don't you?"

Harry considered her query. It was honest enough. Did he feel better? The Dursleys were still terrible people (well, maybe except Dudley), Dumbledore still hid things from him, Sirius was still his father, Mr. Weasley was still dead, and the Weasleys' lives were still torn apart. Yet now, after that duel, everything just seemed lighter, more manageable.

He nodded slowly, "Yes Monica, I do feel better, better than I've felt in months in fact."

"Good to know." She said and walked up to him. She wrapped her arms around him and gave him a fierce hug.

Harry appreciated her gesture and was touched by the genuine feeling behind it. He encircled her waist and pulled her closer, their bodies were touching, and were stuck against each other. A moment passed and then several more, but they didn't separate.

"Harry..." She whispered. She tilted her head back and brought her face closer to his. Their lips were inches apart and he could count the tiny, little freckles that dotted her nose.

In one sweep, their lips were one, moulded against each other, like that's where they belonged. His one hand was raised from her waist and bunched in her short black hair. He fisted several strands and forced her mouth impossibly closer to his own. She moaned when she felt him squeeze her tight.

After several minutes of blissful snogging, the two magicals separated, their eyes dazed. She intertwined her fingers with his and raised herself enough to kiss his neck.

"Let's go to your place." She said.

He didn't even want to argue.

Aftermath

A scrawny-looking woman in dirty, tattered robes and big, protuberant glasses that made her eyes look three times their natural size, sat on an old cot. Her surroundings were bare, she was in an ugly, dank cave, where water dripped from everywhere and everything stank. The witch pulled at her long, matted brown hair in frustration. She hated when she was left in the cave. It wasn't like when she spent so much of her valuable time in there, she actually achieved anything.

"Blast that Sana and her mad ideals." The bizarre witch muttered under her breath.

She continued to curse everyone and everything around her, until after a few minutes she got tired and bored of doing so. It was only so much fun to badmouth another when no one was there to listen. She sighed as she sat back on her haunches, her hands knotted into tight fists in her lap. Her eyes were gazing intently at the dark stone floor she was expected to sleep on for yet another night.

When she had agreed to come to the Apollo Temple of Oracles, she had not agreed to this! Yes, Sybil Trelawney was very unhappy with her lot in life. After sixteen years of house-elves' unbidden service during all hours of day and night, she could not reconcile with washing her own bed sheets and cooking her own food. She was a terrible cook to boot!

Yet it all would have been bearable, had she been making progress, any progress, in her Divining. In the months she had spent in Delphi since Cassandra, her scary, vampire great-grandmother by family, had left her there, Sybil had tried, she'd really tried to learn, but it was all so futile. Occlumency eluded her. She lacked even the most rudimentary skills that the Oracles at Delphi possessed. Well it wasn't her fault! They were practically raised since birth in the way of the Oracles and she had made her own way!

Her hands were let loose when she felt her rage and indignation subside. It was becoming a usual habit with her. She would be angry with everyone for a little while whenever she was sent to the cave

for some 'alone time' to 'get in touch with her spirit.' She would then re-emerge with nothing discernibly useful gained. Even if she did make a prophecy (which according to Sana and her merry band of followers she did quite often), she wouldn't remember it in any case.

Sybil's eyes were closed as she bemoaned her fate. Her hands were on either side of her face and she was trying to squeeze her face together or something of that fashion. If she were honest with herself, she had no idea what she was doing, just as long as the time continued to while away. So engrossed she was in her predicament, she didn't notice the green fumes that were permeating through the walls of the cave and slowly surrounding her. They were odd, noxious fumes that were filling up the air and making it difficult to breathe. The poor Oracle didn't even realise when she inhaled several of the fumes as her pained lament continued in her internal monologue.

Suddenly, she stopped all her movements. The once twitchy witch sat still as a statue. Her hands fell from her face limply to her sides. Her breaths were deep and measured. Her eyes began to open and instead of the usual misty brown, her sockets were completely white and empty. In a disembodied double voice, Sybil began to incant her newest prophecy.

The one to vanquish the Dark Lord has approached.

Born to those who thrice defied and fourth died.

Born as the seventh month died.

Marked as an equal, the power within him is awakening.

The power that he knows not is growing and forming.

The power will reach its precipice,

When they who matter most champion the one.

Until such time, the war is held in stasis and people will die,

For neither can live while the other survives.

The power to vanquish the Dark Lord will rise when the one is championed...

As the last echo of the words left her lips, Sybil fell over, her balance lost. Every part of her body was trembling in nervousness and anticipation as she slowly reopened her brown eyes. She was silent and unmoving. Her voice as an Oracle was still faintly audible in the background.

She dragged two fingers to her lips to prevent herself from crying out and her mind raced in fear. She couldn't... It wasn't... Could she? "The power he knows not..." She whispered and then slapped her hand over her gaping mouth, her eyes wide and disbelieving.

For the first time in her life, Sybil Trelawney remembered.

Author's Notes:

First of all, I'm sorry it took SOOO long to get this chapter out. But my new Beta's have been working tirelessly for a while now and its good to see this finally come to fruition. Also I had a bit of a writer's block these past two months, so writing has been slow.

I'm keeping my A/N short so:

1. Luna is finally here and this is just the beginning of the madness she's going to throw into the mix.
2. I've never done many action scenes before, so let me know what you thought of the Sirius/Molly, Cassandra/Cassie and Harry/Tournament scenes. Anyone wish to comment on Molly's new avatar? This is only the beginning of kick-ass Molly.
3. The Trelawney family history has finally come full circle and the secret is out. Comments?
4. Voldemort senses something fishy. Are there any suggestions on that story arc or if you want to see more on it or not?
5. Madame Bones is going to surprise a lot of people in this story. She is very different from Fanon!Amelia in any case.

6. Do you guys like Monica? Want her around for a bit more? Because she's disposable after a few chapters and then I won't ever need to reintroduce her into the story. So let me know...

7. The Sybil scene has been in my mind for some time. I actually got the inspiration for it from real Greek stories where the Oracles of Delphi would inhale fumes of some sort that would kill a mere mortal but grant them supernatural abilities. Apparently Apollo would whisper to them tidbits of the future of the mortal who approached them and they would incant prophecies in that manner.

Thank you all for your encouraging and meaningful reviews. I appreciate and adore each and every one of them and each and every one of you. Thank you for making The Road to Freedom such a delight to write!

Now hit that REVIEW button down there and tell me what you thought of this recent, action-packed, and long overdue update!

Until next time!

~ Gatonio.

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